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Fear of Achievement Among Young Women in Urban Pakistan: A Phenomenological Analysis of Fear of Achievement (FOA)

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Fear of Achievement Among Young Women in Urban Pakistan: A Phenomenological Analysis of Fear of Achievement (FOA)

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Abstract: The purpose of this research is to explore the antecedents of young women’s fear of achievement (FOA) in Karachi, Pakistan. Based on the empirical literature, a semi-structured interview guideline was developed for conducting focus groups until a data-rich saturation level was achieved. To this end, eight focus groups were conducted with 61 females (mean age = 22.5 years). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to interpret lived and subjective experiences of women’s fear of becoming high achievers. The results of this research indicated that women had a low sense of achievement in response to successful experiences, and high fear of success in terms of their future ventures. Women expressed gender discrimination in how they were socialized, pressured by religious and patriarchal norms, and their beliefs and experiences of success and achievements. These findings can be explained by gendered socialization practices in Pakistan, culturally embedded religious and patriarchal norms, objectification of women, silencing, and early marriages. Overall, females are provided with different sets of expectations for achievement in the feminine-communal orientations and are distant from success-related competence orientations. The paper also discusses possible implications of our findings for young Pakistani women and proposes the need for scholarship and concerted efforts to resolve the factors that instigate the FOA among women.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The gender gap in education and professional achievement is very high in developing countries. In Pakistan, this trend has led many social scientists and policymakers to explore the reasons for this gap. The present study finds that a key antecedent to this problem is the prevalence of fear of achievement among females. Therefore, we explored the social and psychological experiences of women that make them anxious about becoming high achievers. In this study, we have highlighted how our socialization practices and specific gender roles make women more critical of their success and achievements. This study has vital implications for the gender gap in Pakistan and elsewhere in the world.
1. Introduction
Psychologists have long debated the study of gender from a nature versus nurture perspective. Despite the post-modern views of gender fluidity dominating today’s mainstream culture, there are still several scholarships that posit that there are some inherent gender disparities. They relegate the theories of socialization that explain any of these “natural” gender differences. Solely biological research in recent years, however, has provided fewer compelling explanations for the concept of achievement in boys and girls. In an environment conducive to achievement and success, many women have outperformed men in traditionally masculine domains of success, suggesting that men and women are essentially equally capable of such achievements.

The present study employs a nurture based social psychology approach to explore the lingering FOA in women. Socialization practices (beginning in the early years but also being lifelong) become an integral in formulating specific gender roles and cultural practices that almost become ingrained in females’ personalities. The literature below investigates why women fear achievement and the factors that prevent them from realizing their potential in fields that are considered traditionally masculine.

1.1. Defining fear of achievement (FOA)
Fear of success/achievement has been sporadically argued as a powerful phenomenon, but it has not been formally defined or theorised. According to Rabstejnek (2015), argues for gendered, cultural, societal, and developmental influences that contribute to FOA. In a historical analysis of this phenomenon, Rabstejnek argued that multiple generations of culture and socialization have caused women to repress their passion for success and over time this has been internalized by women. Thus, the fear of success or imposter syndrome is socially determined and deeply embedded in gender roles. For example, Horner speculated that women are conflicted when they show competencies and abilities that go against their stereotypical and internalized sex role. They resolve this conflict by arousing the motive to avoid success such that their gender roles are not questioned (Rabstejnek, 2015).

In the gender psychology literature, fear of success is defined as tendency to avoid achievements due to various socially reinforced reasons such as gender roles (Helgeson, 2012). According to Helgeson, fear of success is generally perceived by each gender, also leads to different consequences for men and women. Women, for example, tend to avoid achievement because it is associated with masculine traits, the exhibition of which leads to social rejection and the feeling of being ‘unfeminine’ while for men the negative consequence is self-absorption (Helgeson, 2012).

In various online forums of phobias, success-related phobias have become more visible. Psychologists and therapists have started online and in clinic help forums to highlight fear of success (see Babbel, 2019; Olesen, 2019). Although they do not define the construct in concrete manner, but they use the terms that equate in meaning. Olesen (2019), for example, calls it Achievemephobia—the fear and anxiety that individuals, especially females, might experience because they are afraid of inability to handle outcomes of success such as fame or wealth.

We take a psycho-social, cultural, and gendered approach to understanding the concept of fear of achievement. For the purpose of operational definition of “Fear of Achievement (FOA)” in our study, we define fear and anxiety as the lived and perceived experiences of subjects that make them afraid and/or highly anxious and as a result, keeps them away from succeeding in professional aptitudes and careers.
1.2. Gender roles and FOA

Even though “fear of success” is evident in both men and women, it is derived from different cultural and social influences and has different social impacts for different genders (Helgeson, 2012). Researcher Matina Horner observed that qualities such as competence, independence and intellectual achievement did not conform to the societal norms and standards of femininity but did align well with the norms and standards of masculinity (See Helms, 1981; Horner, 1972).

Horner’s first study of projective storytelling technique showed that 65% of women wrote stories with conflict while 90% of men wrote positive stories. Horner replicated the study over the course of 6 years and noted an incremental trend in the degree of fear of success in women where they would associate achievement with selfishness and egoism (see Helgeson, 2012; Horner, 1972).

Fear of success in women can be closely related to societal norms and patriarchal values instilled in individuals, resulting in internalized misogyny. In a study conducted by Jacqueline Fleming (1982), fear of success in females was clearly associated with struggles to pursue a career that would allow them to prioritize and give substantial attention to the domestic affairs of the household (as they remain a woman’s area of expertise), which is a belief dictated by patriarchal societal values. While among similarly motivated males, it was found that their pragmatic career orientation was the product of compensatory motivational dynamics (Fleming, 1982).

1.3. Religious norms and patriarchy

In conservative cultures, any kind of bragging becomes a violation of female gender norms and quickly catches the attention of people around. Interestingly, women themselves also remain equally negative towards women who talk about their success and achievements (Walter, 2012). In conservative/patriarchal cultures such as those of a Pakistan, the general definition of modesty is shaped by religious and patriarchal norms that translate in a generic category of “modest behaviour” (Khawaja, 2013). This category parallels with the concept of a “good girl” and teaches an average woman not to brag/call attention to herself, be mindful of her clothes, attitude, walking, talking, and her daily doings and keeps her in check by the constant threat of being labelled as immodest by the society (Madden, 2000).

Research by Anjum, Kamal, and Bilwani (2019) on gender gap in females’ participation in the workforce indicates that female university and college graduates from the urban centers of Pakistan are constantly struggling to balance religious and patriarchic norms. These norms restrict women in certain jobs that seem better fitting for females and do not conflict with their feminine roles, i.e. despite having professional education in medicine and psychology, many would choose to stay at home and engage in caretaking roles. This shows the ways in which religious and patriarchal gender norms in Pakistan hampered the ability of women to utilize their full potential (especially at the workplace). More recent research from Pakistan conducted by Anjum, Aziz, Chilton, and Usman (2018) indicated that gender beliefs and action tendencies of men and women for women’s rights are weak and there is a gap in the understanding and impact of these beliefs on women’s engagement in educational and political engagement.

1.4. Self-image

Self-image is a foundational concept in the development of humans and becomes contested as individuals feel the pressure to align their selves with their sex and gender roles. Cross and Madson (1997) and Cross, Hardin, and Gergek-Swing (2011) suggest how some of the observable differences in the behaviours between men and women stem from the different ways in which they define themselves. They explain how men possess an independent self-construal which is not dependant on other people and focuses on individual traits and skills. In contrast, females possess a relational/interdependent self-construal which entails taking cues about themselves from their relationship with others.

Roberts and Petersen (1992) provide a salient example of girls’ social self-image improving as they do well in subjects like maths and science. However, around grade seven and eight, they...
begin to associate negative consequences with achievement in these very subjects that they once took great pride in. A possible reason for this could be the gradual recognition that maths and science are traditionally male-dominated fields and that may lead to them feeling alienated when advancing in a field with rarely any female role models to emulate. A study conducted by Good, Mangels, and Deering (2014) showed how the stereotype threat of girls performing poorly in Math subjects was greatly reduced when they were told (by reading an article) that a good performance in mathematics was due to effort as opposed to ability.

Considering these issues pertaining to a girl’s self-image, it makes sense why many of them would fear success in subjects like maths and science. However, from a cross-cultural perspective, Horner’s fear of achievement (FOA) proposition is criticised by Farooq and Shah (2008) research on student attitudes towards mathematics in Pakistan. Farooq and Shah place the brunt of women’s decreasing participation in mathematics on their attitudes. The results of their study showed that boys and girls were nearly identical in their level of confidence and perception of usefulness regarding maths. These findings hence suggest that gender stereotypes and threats of achievement in maths are perhaps inculcated in the later years of socialization.

Another important contributor towards women’s low sense of achievement is also linked to them scoring higher than men on measures of rejection sensitivity. This measure assesses the inclination of females towards accepting rejection due to their gender and sexism (London, Downey, Romero-Canyas, Rattan, & Tyson, 2012). Consequences of rejection sensitivity are either withdrawal (from activities that may lead to success) and/or remaining silent. Therefore, this sense of rejection may also lead to lower effort towards achievement goals.

1.5. Smart versus social dilemma

Horner (1972) did a series of experiments to study FOA and how that differed between men and women. In the experiments, she gave participants a peg and they had to complete the story. She discovered that women associated conflicts with success hence showed a fear of success because of the negative consequences they associated with it. Men however (90%) showed a positive response to the peg when completing the story as compared to (35%) women. This showed a clear difference in their perception of success; men were more likely to be happy with their achievements whereas women associated negative social consequences with it, which often entailed ideas of abandonment and isolation by friends and family.

Contemporary literature on the matter such as the study by Bell (1996) shows that young girls perceived achievement and affiliation as being incompatible with each other and hence could not see themselves as achieving both. She identified this as the smart vs. social dilemma, where girls thought that their achievements were likely to jeopardize their existing or future relationships. Another example of this dilemma is provided by research pertaining to role behaviour, which shows that females that display incongruent role behaviour are perceived as successful in the workplace but are considered unfeminine (Diekman, Brown, Johnston, & Clark, 2010). This is because such traits (i.e. ones that make females successful at work) are considered masculine hence ascribing to such traits to females, may have negative repercussions.

Moss-Racusin conducted a study where she asked female and male participants to be part of a mock job interview. During the interview, the subjects were asked questions that forced them to self-promote, i.e. talk about their achievements. The study found that those men were much better at this, while women predominantly gave their credit away by using collective nouns such as “we”. In addition to this, women tended to add negative elements to many of their achievements by describing their earlier struggles as compared to describing their excellence at a course (Walter, 2012).

In the same vein, Bell (1996) identified the “Silence vs. Bragging Dilemma” in her study, where she found that girls usually hide their success because talking about it feels like bragging which might make other people feel bad about themselves (Helgeson, 2012). Research has shown that
women who self-promote or brag are less adored in the office, earn less money and are considered as less warm (Walter, 2012). Even in the virtual world of social media, which are often designed to brag (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, etc.). Maria Bustillos in her article, “Why Can't We Brag on Twitter?” points out that most of the bragging on twitter and Facebook is done by men, where they are seen praising their own accomplishments (Bustillos, 2012).

A strong repercussion of this may be “internalization”, i.e., as girls are not aware of the contradictory values rooted in their reaction to success, they may internalize these gender roles (Bell, 1989). Their ambivalence or “silence” about success can lead to failure of own their achievements, an unwillingness to take risk for the sake of achievement, and ultimately a fear of undertaking tasks with a potential of high success.

1.6. Shift from traditional masculine to traditional feminine

Studies on women’s FOA have identified that high achieving women switch from traditionally masculine pursuits to traditionally feminine ones (Helgeson, 2012). Gjerberg’s (2002) study explored gender differences and similarities in transitions between specialities among Norwegian doctors. She identified that women working in medicine are more likely to switch from fields like medical surgery (perceived as a more masculine) to fields like gynaecology and obstetrics which are considered more feminine. Gjerberg also found that the reasons for this shift included heavy workloads, night shifts, and a struggle for female doctors to combine childcare and work. Recent research also indicates that females tend to show lower levels of self compassion compared to male participants (Reilly, Rochlen, & Awad, 2014). This trend might be shifting but still may also interfere with their career orientations.

This pattern of shift is also found increasingly in Pakistan where a traditional gender role attitude leads women to prefer going to a female gynaecologist over a male one. A survey distributed among fourth-year MBBS students of Lahore Medical and Dental College found for instance, that most female medical students picked Obstetrics/Gynaecology (24%) while male medical students opted for Surgery as their most preferred specialty (51%) (Hashmi et al., 2010).

Sexual harassment and sexism in the workplace force women to shift to traditionally female jobs such as that of a teacher or a secretary. Shaikh (2000) found for instance that nurses in a hospital in Pakistan are sexually harassed verbally (29.6%) and physically (16.9%), both by patients and male physicians. Interestingly, this is also true for prestigious universities like the Agha Khan hospital in Pakistan where medical students reported being mistreated or belittled on a regular basis which leads to an increasing rate of psychological morbidity and low self-confidence (Shoukat et al., 2010).

1.7. Early marriages and the double shift

Early marriages of girls are globally considered a human rights violation. Majority of the women in Pakistan get married in their early twenties due to societal pressure which affects their occupational success. Research has shown that married women face far more negative consequences than married men. Shauman and Xie (1996) found, for instance, that parenthood effects men and women scientists differently, placing an extra burden on women but having neutral or positive effects on men. This is because gender roles become more salient with the burden of child-rearing and women are viewed by couples as better able to nurture children.

Contemporary research has therefore tried to explore this phenomenon of the “double shift” that women are increasingly faced with and that affects their ability to do well in the workplace. Shoaib, Khan, and Khan (2010), for instance, posited that the problem of the double shift arises because women are hard-pressed on time. Married women must constantly devote their mental and physical energy to both the home and the workplace, eventually having to choose between the two options. On the other hand, this problem of juggling work and the home does
for her male counterpart as traditional gender roles ascribe men the role of the primary breadwinner.

1.8. Current study and rationale
Our literature indicates that success as well as FOA in women can be closely related to societal norms and especially to patriarchal values. In a country like Pakistan, which is often on the lowest ranks of women rights and economic opportunities for women (see, World Economic Forum report, 2018), it is vital to empower women in academic and professional fields. In this year’s report, Pakistan has been ranked 148th on gender equality globally out of the 149 countries in the World Economic Forum’s (WEF). Despite the diplomatic level push for empowering Pakistani women, the gender gap of women’s professional participation in low (Anjum et al., 2019). Hence, it is instrumental to understand what makes them afraid of being high achievers. The study aimed to identify the social and psychological factors associated with a females’ sense of achievement in the field of psychology.

A rising number of female graduates in the field of psychology does not correspond with a reduction in the FOA experienced by females in the field. Research pertaining to the context of Pakistan suggest how the issue becomes more pronounced as gender role strain corresponds with patriarchal and communal values. Although there is no specific research regarding a sense of achievement among female psychology students, the literature reviewed in the present paper gives a background for applying an emic approach to explore factors that hamper their sense of achievement. Using phenomenological exploration, the study examined the lived experiences and hurdles faced by female psychologists. To fit the needs of this exploration, a bottom-up emic approach was used to understand the issue of culture-bound fears associated with being high achievers.

2. Method

2.1. Objectives
The overarching research objective of this study is to qualitatively explore the antecedents for a fear of achievement (FOA) among young females who are pursuing psychology degrees. Within this broader objective, we explored the role of variations in socialization practices for females, role of religion, self-image and self-esteem, inclinations for silence over their achievements, growing trends of femininity appropriation and early marriages (the double shift). Through these exploratory focal objectives, the study aimed to describe common underlying antecedents that restrain women from possessing a sense of achievement.

2.2. Sample
The study employed a purposive sampling technique whereby the participants were consensually asked to volunteer for the focus groups. Eight Focus group sessions were conducted, with a total of 61 females aged between (21–27 years), with the Mean age being 22.5 years. All students were current senior undergraduate or graduate students in psychology programs, and they studied at public or private universities of Karachi, a megacity centre with more than 20 million residents. Only popular city universities from private sector as well as public sector were included for this study because they give representation to students with diverse backgrounds.

2.3. Procedure for qualitative exploration
Based on our literature review, a semi-structured interview guideline was developed for conducting the focus groups. The guideline was flexible and aimed to capture a range of factors that explain why many young women express a low sense of achievement.

Four focus groups were conducted at a private university while the other four were conducted at two public universities in Karachi. All focus groups took place at places which were deemed to be the best fitting for holding 2 h and 30-min duration for focus group discussions and pre and post-discussion conversations with participants. The focus group lasted between 90 min to 130 min. Participation in the focus groups entailed reaching out to students directly, in which their
contributions remained voluntary. An informed consent was acquired from the participants, also involving a permission to record the complete session of the focus group (except for two participants who chose to leave the discussion, everyone gave consent to record and notes taking). After being subsequently introduced to the moderator, the semi-structured interview guideline was followed. The discovery-oriented constructivist approach was used, i.e. the questions and probes from the interview guide were restructured throughout the focus group discussions and were meant to gain a deeper understanding of the participants lived experiences of achievement.

3. Data sources and data analyses
All data were collected within the urban centers of Karachi, Pakistan. Eight Focus group sessions with a total of 61 females’ experiences were the data sources for this exploration. After conducting each FGD, the data were transcribed by first author and a research assistant. All transcribed data became the base data source which was used for initial and more structured thematic and phenomenological analyses. The researchers systematically identified unique, meaningful and recurring narrations of experiences and/or statements and categorized them into overarching themes within the transcribed data. An interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) procedure was used for analyzing the meaning and interpretation of the verbatim and themes. The analyses used the format fitted to the lived experiences-based research (see Anjum et al., 2019; Khalid & Anjum, 2019).

Identified themes and relevant verbatim were rigorously discussed among the researchers and an independent reviewer of the data. Throughout this process, iterative interpretations of the FGDs generated deeper understanding of lived experiences of informants. During analyses, we focused on commonalities and variations among participants’ discussions surrounding their specific lived experiences related to achievement for women. Repetitive semantically meaningful verbatim statements were identified as significant, and non-overlapping themes. Informants described their unique experiences, the kind of discriminatory practices that they witnessed and/or were exposed to and whether they used any kind of coping strategies. The Results section incorporates participants’ quotes in order to represent a voice of our participants (see Ponterotto, 2006).

4. Results
A total of 319 non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements were identified through our focus group discussions (FGDs). Arranging these statements into semantically meaningful clusters resulted in seven themes. Each of these themes explain why young women in the field of psychology are afraid of being labelled as high achievers in Pakistan. In this section, for each theme, participants’ lived experiences have been reported in verbatim quotes.

As evident from previous literature, males and females tend to view, understand and take pride in their achievement in various ways. The results indicated that women overall had a low sense of achievement in response to successful experiences and in terms of their future ventures. Experiences of our informants suggest that females differ extensively in the ways in which they are socialized and how religious and patriarchal norms impacts their gender roles. This section provided various themes that emerged as reasons to explain such differences.

4.1. Socialization practices (gender roles and stereotypes)
An important element to explain females differing sense of achievement is through the different ways of socialization for both males and females. From parenting to the role of the media, participants stressed on the ways in which both genders were socialized to believe and understand their particular role in a society, i.e. females as communal, with traits associated with nurturing, and being emotionally weak and dependent while men to have agentic traits associated with independence, assertiveness and “getting the job done”. These various socialization processes also impose a stereotype threat, which further strengthens the need to conform to the negative stereotypes associated with one’s gender.
The way we are seen, raised and treated by our families from early on leads to self-doubt as women are constantly told that they are not suitable to become pilots or military officers. Due to this reason, they acquire a sense self-doubt whereby they develop a fear achievement in these particular fields.

Almost all Pakistani TV dramas provide bad role models for young girls. For example, representations of women in famous drama serials such as “Dureshehvar” have portrayed a female character who conforms to gender appropriate norms and behaviors. She serves as an obedient daughter-in-law and wife. She is then positively reinforced and praised for her sacrifices for the family and is strongly contrasted with another female character who takes on the role of a working woman and is criticized for not contributing to her household duties.

Achievement and success are only acceptable when a woman is dealing with her house, as that remains the motherland of traditions and gender roles. Success inside the house means that she is not compromising on her primary duties.

Women suggested how even if they were to be good at their education, they would still be expected to live up to the standard of their role as a homemaker or else they would be seen as inefficacious in all aspects of their life.

In families where both the husband and the wife are working, any trouble or any caretaking role in the house is always handed over to the female as she is expected to be the master of both roles. If a woman must choose between her two roles, they will let go of their professional achievements as they cannot afford to bear the shame of letting go of their familial roles.

4.2. Religious norms & patriarchal practices (feminine modesty)
Most focus groups heavily discussed the significance of religion and shared many experiences related to patriarchal motives linked to religion and how they affect a young women’s lower sense of achievement and higher modesty.

Our religion also guides us as to how we are “modest” (women) whereas men in any family are naturally more motivated to strive for successful academic engagements, and they are more likely to achieve more and become providers. Allah (God) has created more career prospects for men and hence they possess a greater need for achievement compared to women.

Islam does not stop women from achieving, it is just a convenient thought for our families and specially for our men to gain and maintain the privilege and support from women. Families support men and at the same time, they create hurdles for women. From the beginning, we have a very different start, as men are given opportunities in order to pursue what they ought to, while women rarely are.

My father, who is head of our family, despite a financial crisis, sent both his sons abroad to study. He provided them full autonomy to decide their universities and invested in their education because they will be the breadwinner and future heads of this family. On the contrary, for a daughter, the provision of good education is considered a financial favor for which parents endlessly tend to take credit for. Not only that, but they also want us to be obedient and grateful daughters.

4.3. Self-image and objectification
In terms of understanding the ways in which a women’s self-image contributed to her lack of a sense of achievement, many other variables such as self-confidence, self-esteem and self-perception also dominated the conversations.

Women are considered as masculine and get labeled as bossy if they are competent (while men never get labeled as such). They are also criticized for having an attitude problem if they show good leadership skills.
In terms of being at educational institutes, females are constantly required to “tone” down their feminist tendencies and remain “neutral” and calm about their ideas and beliefs. They would have to conform to these expectations placed upon them in order to protect their sense of self.

In terms of self-confidence and self-esteem, individuals defined the former as a feeling of trust in one’s abilities, qualities and judgments and the latter by suggesting how confident they were about those characteristics. Pakistani women tended to possess an overall low self-confidence as compared to their male counterparts. They also had a very different and specific way of evaluating both their self-esteem and confidence. For example, for females, their self-esteem and confidence would boost or remain positive in response to them being attractive for marital proposals and/or being successful at forming and maintaining relationships.

Getting “rishtas” (proposals for marriage) is considered a form of achievement for females and hence contributes positively to their self-esteem and so the higher the number of proposals for a girl, the higher their self-confidence. The lack of proposals is perceived negatively and so, for example, after the age of 25, girls who remained unmarried are looked down upon and pitied. People around them (more specifically older women) start showering their “duas” (prayers and blessings from Allah) in order for them to have “achey naseeb” (good luck/destiny). This kind of a response by people and the society around them was heavily linked to their low self-esteem.

Another element that contributed to women’s self-esteem was their physical appearance, mainly their skin color and body weight. For the former, being specific to the Pakistani society, fairness was considered an important element to gauge beauty; a fairer woman was likely to have a higher the self-esteem (as compared to a darker one).

Overweight males and females were evaluated differently. When men, for example, would be told they had a fat tummy, the response of people around them would entail something like “uska tou saith ka pait hai” (he has a rich man’s stomach and hence he is overweight). This statement would then in turn also imply how he belongs to a “khaata peeta khaandaan” (a family that is rich enough to eat excessively). A female counterpart is out rightly criticized for being overweight and not having a proper body.

Girls and women especially fear success because they are afraid that achieving too much will make them powerful enough to create the life that they want. In the end, such a success will render them unlovable.

4.4. Fear of rejection or being ignored
Many participants suggested how they continued to question and doubt themselves in response to their family/friend’s disproval and disappointment about their particular achievement. This is to suggest, that fear of achievement (FOA) would often couple with a fear of rejection, mainly towards women, and that was likely to strengthen their sense of fear regarding their achievement.

Women dumb themselves down and downplay their success in different settings so that they can appear more socially accepting.

Parents are joyous when their sons do well because they are not expected to achieve too much. While for their daughters, they only show contentment when they do well, as for them, they are only studying to “study” and not to have a career.

Girls are more afraid of being rejected by their family. We are afraid of disapproval and rejection. Just to be accepted and not disapproved, we choose to not only show disinterest in achievement but also give up on our education and ambition because we are always told that getting married is very important to our parents. We are told that we need to do it for our parent’s happiness. Similarly, girls are also forced to have children, just so that their parents can become grandparents.
4.5. Beliefs about smart vs. social (A question of femininity)

The smart versus social phenomenon was explored by understanding the different set of expectations placed on women due to their beliefs about the ways in which they tend to be evaluated. Participants discussions revealed that smart meant a lack of feminine qualities and the smart versus social binary becomes more pronounced as boys are believed to be “smart” and girls as “hardworking”. In general, men’s success is then attributed to internal causes, and their personal abilities, while a women’s success is attributed to internal and unstable causes (e.g., effort) or external causes (e.g. luck).

In instances where females get good grades or promotions, there are speculations about how it is not because of their efforts but rather their achievement is attributed to the boss’s ulterior motives, or perhaps the woman’s looks. Men remain and get successful more often as compared to their female counterparts. Men’s failure is attributed to external, unstable causes (e.g. lack of effort), while women’s failure attributed to internal, stable causes (e.g. lack of ability).

Women play low key in their studies because they don’t have to continue a professional life later. Most careers are dominated by men even in fields such as psychology. Hence, women are afraid to interact or succeed in studies while simultaneously dominating in jobs, as the two (men and women) often clash if women are strong. This is because women can’t be considered feminine and pleasant if they are high achievers.

It is a well-known fact that men prefer girls who are not smart. These girls fall in a certain category whereby they are pretty and attractive and thought as relationship “material”, but not smart. Women also make fun of themselves about having poor sense of directions when travelling, to associate themselves with such social stereotypes.

4.6. Silence versus bragging

Feminine modesty in the Pakistani society was reported as a general practice for females. For instance, females were used to hiding their achievements due to cultural and religious inclinations.

My mother used to spend time helping with school work and my achievement would be counted due to her efforts.

Modesty is also one of the reasons why females conceal their achievements in order to avoid hurting their colleagues who did not perform as well as them. Whereas males share their achievement in order to get appreciation and they are not concerned about hurting their peers.

The force to push women more towards silence was obvious within the general trend of hiding achievements for both genders. Many participants suggested that they tended to hide their abilities and qualities because of a commonly held fear of the evil eye, referred to as “Nazar lag jaye gi” (meaning one can get affected by the evil eye).

The concept of an evil eye is very much present in our society so both men and women conceal their achievement. Example, men usually conceal their salaries.

4.7. Fear of sexism and harassment

Quite a few participants also suggested that one major antecedent of loss of women’s self-esteem and achievements is a constant fear of sexism and harassment.

While from the outside of this shiny campus people may think that the place is very secure, and all girls can achieve their educational and life dreams. It might be true for some, but I can assure, it is not true for all. I have been harassed by someone in our HR office, since that event of harassment, I have lost my respect in my own eyes, I blame why I went there.
Sometimes, teachers say things that can disturb you for rest of your stay at the university. Many professors would claim to be supportive and liberal and then under their own eyes they let sexist teachers stay and harm our motivation and ability to achieve anything.

In the computer labs, you can visit it yourself, you will find these men who are constantly and inappropriately staring at your body and they treat you as you are objects. I think even if we ignore this, I really do not ever want to be working if such perverts will be everywhere.

4.8. Growing trends of traditional feminine attitudes
This theme emerged from experiences shared by many participants indicating how there has been a shift from masculine and traditional ways of different sets of expectations placed on genders to perform and posses’ specific tasks and abilities, respectively.

Nowadays, there is a strong inclination among females to be suitable and “good” females, who are pushed to please their husbands and in-laws after marriage. Being prepared to get themselves married from an early age, they are constantly told that their only “real job” would be to make “gol rotis” (a perfectly round-shaped bread) for their family.

Being a mother, more than anything else, is a single criterion of achievement and success for females and when they were unable (or rarely unwilling) to have children, their husbands would be encouraged to remarry. This fear has a particularly negative effect on female’s self-confidence because they are made to overall feel a sense of inadequacy and failure.

Females are likely to remain in educational programs and jobs that are congruent with their gender role expectations, and an aberration of any sort changes their evaluation considerably. This leads women to suggest how their careers are often extensions of their feminine roles.

Females who pursue STEM fields are ones who do not conform to the stereotypical woman. Their role and profession are then considered threatening, arrogant, men-like, not good marriage material and so forth. They possess a higher fear of accomplishments such as getting senior positions, appearing powerful and being assertive would render them as “unlovable” which also has strong implications for the male ego.

4.9. Early marriages and the double shift
For females, there was a strong emphasis placed on marriage and family life as compared to their education and in turn, their success gained through a career. Participants reported how girls in our society are often questioned at social gatherings regarding their marriage, which is meant to further reinforce it as the only kind of achievement that a woman should be interested in.

We are often asked rhetorical questions such as “Itna parh ke kya karogi?” (What will you do after studying too much?). This is meant to indicate to women that their education will be of no use or merit, as the result of everything would entail a marriage proposal. Even if women ought to study after marriage, they are usually not allowed to do so and are told to make their home their primary concern.

The specific age brackets for when women can and should get married are very different for men and women. For males, marriage is considered as an option when they are settled and successful in their careers, while for females, they are pushed to prioritize marriage over careers due to an understanding of how women cannot get married later and/or after a certain age.

Most females also suggested that this young age was the time where women would be able to work towards their educational/career aspirations, and that is the time that they are likely to miss out on due to the enormous pressure on marriage.
In social gatherings, aunties (to refer to older age women and/or distant relatives) give young girls good wishes such as “Naseeb ache karey, achay ghar main jao, shohar acha milet” (may you have good luck, go to a nice house, and get a good husband). These blessings never contain any prayer or luck for a woman's success in her education or career (whereas men/boys are often given such blessings).

5. Discussion
This study capitalizes on the lived experiences and narratives presented by 61 women between the ages of 21–27 who described their socialized and lived fear of achievement (FOA). The results of this study tested our research objective and speculations. The results suggested that females expressed a FOA when it comes to pursuing professional careers and in response to successful experiences and regarding their future ventures. This was explained through various mechanisms such as socialization processes, religious practices, sense of self (self-image, self-confidence and self-esteem), personality inclinations for openly revealing and conversing about their proficiencies (silence versus bragging), and early marriages (double shift). This is to suggest that, processes such as early socialization and/or sense of self and personality inclinations were intertwined with religious norms and they worked simultaneously to produce a certain expectation and a FOA for females.

The findings of this study suggest that women's achievements and successful experiences are enormously hindered by the different consequences associated with achievement and its incongruence with respect to female gender roles. These findings are also supported by previous research in Pakistan conducted by Anjum et al. (2019) that indicated that there is a vivid gender gap in employment of skilled women after getting professional education as Psychologists and medical doctors. This study digs one step deeper and points to the psychological barrier to participation of women in high achieving professions in Pakistan which is prevalence of FOA.

Current findings also endorse how religion determines gender norms in favour of males. The findings can be related to how religious and patriarchal norms prescribe “modest behaviour” (Khawaja, 2013), creating the category of “Good Girl” (Madden, 2000), which results in females then being negative towards women who boast their success and achievements (Walter, 2012). This also corresponds with studies that highlight the ways in which females are likely to conform to the norms and values that are associated with their gender, which would in turn dictate their successful experiences (Helms, 1981).

Physical appearance also remained an important characteristic for female's sense of self (i.e. mainly self-esteem and self-confidence) and appearing attractive to their male counterparts was a highly significant component of that. This is because attractive females felt that they had a greater chance of acquiring a partner and/or marriage proposal (referred to as a rishta in Urdu) which was an immense source of pride and confidence (for both themselves and the family). Socialization plays a significant role in terms of perpetuating a certain kind of appearance for both males and females and hence attractive physical characteristics remain very gender-specific.

For females, it was also important to note how they were more likely to take comments and evaluations about themselves very personally. For example, females who were told that they appeared to be overweight started a heavy diet plan (often involving starvation). The trend can be explained using females higher score on measures of rejection sensitivity (London et al., 2012), which suggests how they are likely to internalize comments made by individuals around them and so have a low (and perhaps vulnerable) self-esteem and confidence. Research indicates that females viewed their own achievements in terms of the evaluations by people around them (i.e. possessing an inter-dependent self-construal) and from one’s own set of achievements and success), (Cross et al., 2011).

Due to perceived lower self-worth and autonomy with respect to themselves and their achievements, females acquire an attitude whereby they generally feel incompetent in life. This worked very significantly to produce a self-serving bias by putting women into a vicious
cycle of underachievement. It would begin with them firstly being unlikely to take up opportunities that might lead to successful experiences (because they deemed themselves to be incompetent) and subsequently leading them to underperform in various scenarios whereby they feel that they would be unable to succeed.

Understanding the notion of success also varies between different cultures. The present study, using the subjective experience of women in a collectivistic culture like Pakistan, defines the success of a woman within the private sphere of the house. This definition is inculcated early on through various socialization processes (by placing a different emphasis on their education, pushing towards different activities, early marriages, remarks about being a good housewife and so forth). This defines their success and inevitably their sense of achievement within the specific sphere of their domestic lives, and their responsibilities towards their family.

The study also provided evidence for Bell’s silence versus bragging phenomenon (Bell, 1996), which usually coupled with two other factors: socialization practices and the stereotype threat. This is to suggest that males were only likely to conceal achievements and experience the stereotype threat when their achievements were incongruent with the stereotypes associated with their gender. Women however rarely bragged about their successful experiences as it went against the prescribed notion of femininity (Walter, 2012). Silence on the part of females regarding their successful experiences can also be explained through females trying to protect the self-esteem/self-confidence of those around them (Moss-Racusin & Rudman, 2010).

Women’s successful experiences in the workplace were met by numerous hindrances by various social institutions, explicit sexism, harassment and discrimination. The smart versus social dilemma was experienced by females in different setting such as the workplace. Woman who were more social or were exposed to a large network of people within the workplace (that is generally more male-dominated), was inclined to step back due to discouragement of interacting with males. These findings were a parallel to Korson’s study, which also points to the decreased female interaction and restricted job options for females who remain at the receiving end of these hindrances (Korson, 1968). This would inevitably translate into poor job prospects for females as they continue to receive little or no opportunity for networking.

In terms of early marriages within the Pakistani context, it was noteworthy to understand the ways in which females were bombarded with notions about marriage and raising a family. Furthermore, discouragement about education and career through various socialization practices inculcated a belief that marriage was going to be their biggest success. Research into role behavior in a similar light suggest how women who were able to succeed in terms of their career were displaying an incongruent role behavior and were hence considered unfeminine (Diekman et al., 2010). Such incongruency was also a result of choosing certain career choices (which may be considered masculine, e.g. boxing or sports) and lead to an immense fear of rejection, self-doubt and a general fear regarding their achievements.

Overall, the findings of this study can be summarized into a model that may indicate the process of how women become afraid of being high achievers. As shown in Figure 1, it can be argued that antecedents such as role of family, early socialization, culture and religion may be associated with certain processes such as gender-specific and congruent roles, expectancies of achievement, social control mechanisms and early marriages. These processes in turn may have an association with the outcomes that our participants experienced, for instance, endorsing traditional gender roles, self-confidence, stereotype threat, silence versus bragging, smart versus Social, beliefs about self, and low self-esteem, so on and so forth (See Figure 1).
Specific to the Pakistani context, traditional ideas about gender roles and (e.g. a female’s role within the private sphere) tend to relegate the presence of women in the public sphere as both redundant and detrimental to the fabric of society. Through an acknowledgement and a concerted effort to questions these notions, beliefs and practices that instigate the fear of success in females, we can take the necessary steps in order to prevent such consequences and mobilize women without fear of discrimination and social rejection.
The current study has strong implications in terms of suggesting a need for mitigation strategies for lifting women out of their fears and propelling them to achieve higher academic and personal goals. Provision of educational and work opportunities to women must be supplemented by an egalitarian, harassment and discriminatory free social environment. Pakistan gender equality indices are alarming, and they become potent in recognizing the discrepancies in our socialization practices and in turn informing women about their impacts. An example of such kind of head-on initiatives may entail working on resolving the ongoing debate in Pakistan’s parliament on increasing the legal age of marriage for women which as of now remains 16 years of age.

5.1. Conclusion
In this exploration, we draw our conclusion based on the phenomenology of fear of achievement (FOA) based on the experiences and narratives of 61 young women from the urban hub of Karachi, Pakistan. The results of this study conclude that Pakistani females express fear of success and a low sense of achievement when it comes to their professional aspirations, experiences and regarding their future ventures. In conclusion, their fear of success is not simply inculcated through socialization practices at home but also through the social, educational, and religious, practises that are embedded in the traditional culture of the country. Familial and patriarchal values (that propel traditional gender roles) in Pakistani society, religious norms, and unsupportive school and work environments deters women from having a sense of academic and professional achievement. Making concrete policies to provide socially supportive, psychologically safe and egalitarian environment to young girls will ensure empowered young women who will not be afraid of becoming high achievers.

Cover Image
Source: Sketch by Ms. Ghazal Shahid (Commissioned by Dr. Gulnaz Anjum)

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Correction
This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

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