



## Perceptions of Gender Equality Among University Students: A Qualitative Inquiry at the University of Sargodha

Humaira Raheem

MPhil Scholar, Department of Sociology, Sargodha University,  
Sargodha

[humairaraheem512@gmail.com](mailto:humairaraheem512@gmail.com)

Sara Munaf

MPhil Scholar, Department of Sociology, Sargodha University,  
Sargodha

[Saramunaf2@gmail.com](mailto:Saramunaf2@gmail.com)

Faisal Farhan

MPhil Scholar Department of Sociology, Sargodha University,  
Sargodha

[mfaisalfarhan103@gmail.com](mailto:mfaisalfarhan103@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*The study aims to understand students' views on gender equality at the University of Sargodha, based on their experience in classes, campus life and at the university level. The interviews with students from varied disciplines reveal that most people consider gender equality to mean balanced rights, their share of different opportunities and equal responsibilities for each gender. Analysis of the findings pointed out that women and men have different levels of involvement in academic work and leadership tasks and different opportunities to use campus resources and that cultural and social standards play a big role in these differences. Even so, the study recognizes that the university does have positive policies, including the Quick Response Force (QRF), Departmental Student Advisors (DSAs) and equal options for student activities. The study adds weight to calls for spreading awareness about gender issues, equal application of policies and more gender-sensitive campaigns to create a better balance at the university level.*

**Keywords:** Gender, Equality, Perception, Awareness, Balanced.

### Introduction

Currently, the topic of gender equality is important in both educational research and efforts to reform universities (Morley, 2005). Since universities are a reflection of society, they help shape social values, customs and learning (UNESCO, 2019). We need to include gender-sensitive rules and open up equal opportunities to all genders to guarantee an inclusive school setting (Subrahmanian, 2005). Still, strong sociocultural habits, unjust practices within the system and unequal policies often make it hard for girls to achieve equality at universities in countries such as Pakistan (Khan & Faheem, 2017). Since the issues listed are important in the educational system, understanding students is crucial because their experiences shape the culture of schools and universities (Andreotti et al., 2015).

Being a major public university in Punjab, Sargodha University recognizes how important gender equality has become. Though the university put anti-harassment policies and various co-curricular activities into place to encourage inclusivity, it is still unclear if these efforts can truly be noticed on campus (Mahmood & Shah, 2021). Based on reports and informal observations, students' experiences at school and in their social lives can impact their engagement, how they feel and their education results, especially based on their gender. For this reason, we must understand students' views, feelings and reactions to gender equality issues to help plan educational and policy strategies in the future. I investigated how University of Sargodha students view gender equality based on qualitative approaches. It is interested in students' experiences as learners, in extra activities and in their school settings, in addition to their knowledge about gender equality. The research aims to discover what influences girls' and boys' opinions by reviewing the perspectives of students and examining things like peer connections, school rules, cultural activities and departmental rules.

### Research Objectives

- To explore the perceptions and attitudes of university students toward gender equality in academic and social settings.
- To identify the key factors that shape students' understanding and experiences of gender equality on campus.
- To examine the perceived effectiveness of institutional policies and practices in promoting gender equality

### Literature Review

Critical attention should be given to gender equality in higher education since universities impact both social opinions and personal experiences. It has been found through existing research that perceptions, influencing forces and actions from institutions are important for achieving fairness in learning and social interactions. It combines several studies to establish a base for examining how university students view gender equality which factors influence their opinions and whether the university's policies are effective, especially in the context of the university. Generally, students see gender equality according to their own thoughts and what society teaches them. Study conducted by Khan et al. (2019) discovered in Pakistan that although both male and female students supported gender equality in theory, traditional rules impacted their views, with male students saying they do not agree with women leading in academic areas. In a similar spirit, Tadesse & Molla (2021) said that most Ethiopian university students considered gender equality a good idea, but many had difficulty practicing it due to patriarchal culture. In Bryant's (2020) study in a Western context, it was discovered that students in liberal settings endorsed fairness, although they usually missed minor forms of discrimination such as microaggressions among their peers. This research proves that students' views on education tend to vary by cultural context which prompts research into how students manage these challenges at the University of Sargodha. There are many things that influence how students think about and experience gender equality. Cultural customs usually play a big role, mainly within patriarchal communities. Ahmad & Shah (2022) reported that in Pakistan, traditions in the family and exposure to media usually result in students choosing not to seek equality in schools or leadership roles. Interactions with other students can have an effect too, since Garcia & Lopez (2023) suggest that certain groups might promote or oppose gender biases based on the societal context. Going through educational courses impacts the way people look at things. It was found by Patel and Kumar (2020) that the presence of gender training and equality courses in universities made students more aware, but their absence created a feeling of ignorance. According to Lee & Kim (2021), having personal experiences with support or opposition to gender equality affects people's views on the issue. Ensuring that institutions' policies really promote gender equality is a main issue. Mwangi et al. (2022) stated that transparent policies on harassment and equalization encourage students to have confidence in the institution's devotion to equal treatment. Still, it proves difficult to fully implement biometrics. According to Rehman and Fatima (2020), the main reason for weak gender equality in Pakistani universities is poor and inconsistent enforcement of policies. Cultural differences matter a lot too, as Tadesse & Molla (2021) claim that policies inspired by the West may not be useful in all parts of the world. On the other hand, engaging students in leadership, according to Bryant (2020), helps develop their feeling of ownership. Such findings talk about how it is important to review the way policies work and are interpreted in a specific environment such as the University of Sargodha. Even though the literature offers useful knowledge, there is not

much research that looks into specific Pakistani institutions, especially from the students’ perspectives.

**Theoretical Insight**

The research uses gender socialization theory and feminist institutionalism to analyze the process of gender equality at universities. People, according to gender socialization theory, adopt the ideas and standards of society regarding gender roles from childhood, making them behave, dream and think differently in schools (Bem, 1981). This theory shows why some students, mostly from traditional backgrounds, view gender relations based on their culture and community.

Feminist institutionalism further looks at institutions, policies and practices to see how they are influenced by gender and can cause inequality, even in places where it seems nonexistent (Mackay, Kenny, & Chappell, 2010). Although the University of Sargodha has policies aimed at gender equality and involves more female students in extracurricular activities, there are still informal traditions that are very male-centric. In particular, this framework helps us study how the culture, leadership and choices of an institution lead to subtle unequal treatment based on gender.

All of these theories help us understand the difference between what governments decide and what happens in practice and how gender influences people’s lives based on society and individual relationships. This means policies should be modified and the cultural attitudes and regular practices around gender equality on campus should also be dealt with.

**Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design grounded in phenomenology to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of university students regarding gender equality. Phenomenology was chosen as it allows for an in-depth understanding of individuals’ subjective experiences and the meanings they attach to those experiences within their specific socio-cultural and institutional contexts.

Data were collected through detailed, semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of seven students from the University of Sargodha. The selection criteria aimed to ensure representation across genders, thereby capturing a diverse range of perspectives. The sample included three female and four male students enrolled in different undergraduate and postgraduate programs, spanning departments such as Sociology, Psychology, Computer Science, Chemistry, Agriculture, and Economics.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in a confidential setting to ensure participant comfort and encourage open, honest dialogue. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and was guided by a flexible interview protocol designed to explore participants’ conceptual understanding of gender equality, their personal experiences in academic and social settings, and their perceptions of the university’s institutional policies and practices related to gender issues.

Following transcription, the data were analysed using thematic analysis, a method suited for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. Thematic analysis was conducted in several stages:

- Open Coding – Initial data categorization
- Axial Coding – Linking related codes to form key categories
- Selective Coding – Refining categories and integrating themes
- Final refinement of themes relevant to the study’s objectives.

Themes were derived inductively, allowing the participants’ voices to guide the interpretation of data rather than imposing pre-determined categories.

The study used several techniques for accuracy and thoroughness, for example by triangulating data sources, discussing it with colleagues and obtaining feedback from participants whenever possible. Ethics were always applied during the entire research process. Before joining the study, participants were told about its

aim, guaranteed their information would be kept confidential and signed a written consent. All the information published was summarized and no personal details were mentioned to keep the person’s identity private.

By employing a phenomenological lens and a thematic analytic approach, this methodology enabled a comprehensive exploration of students’ nuanced perceptions and experiences of gender equality within the university setting, thereby providing rich insights for institutional policy and practice.

**Results and Discussion**

**Table 1**

**Demographic Profile**

Participant	Age	Gender	Program	Semester	Department
1	23	Male	BS Economics	8th	Economics
2	21	Female	BS Sociology	6th	Sociology
3	22	Female	BS Psychology	5th	Faculty of Social Sciences
4	21	Male	BS Computer Science	3rd	Faculty of Computing & IT
5	24	Female	MPhil Chemistry	1st	Faculty of Sciences
6	23	Male	BS (Hons) Animal Sciences	3rd	Faculty of Agriculture (Animal Sciences)
7	23	Female	BS Sociology	Final	Sociology

The data table above demonstrates that the group for this study is balanced between men and women and consists of four females and three males aged between 21 and 24 years. They cover different subjects like Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Computing and Agriculture and some have just started their third semester, while others are in their final semester. Due to respondents being from various gender groups, age categories, academic ranks and departments, different views about gender equality at the University of Sargodha were gathered.

**Table 02**

**Main Themes and Sub-Themes**

Theme	Sub-Themes
Understanding and Perception of Gender Equality	Definitions of equality vs. equity Misconceptions (e.g., reverse discrimination)
Academic and Institutional Environment	Perceived academic bias Unequal leadership roles Departmental disparities
Harassment, Institutional Policies, and Their Effectiveness	Harassment on campus Awareness of anti-harassment policies Limited policy visibility and enforcement
Participation and Representation	Equal Extracurricular Policy Gender gaps in extracurriculars and fieldwork Barriers to female participation
Cultural and Social Influences	Rural vs. urban mindset differences Family and societal constraints Peer influence
Suggestions for Improvement	Gender sensitization programs Policy promotion and transparency Female mentorship and empowerment

**Results and Discussion**

**Understanding and Perception of Gender Equality**

Participants generally defined gender equality as providing equal opportunities, rights, and responsibilities to all genders. Females should participate in all fields just like males, emphasizing that both genders have equal rights and opportunities across all areas of life. Some participants emphasized equity over sameness, acknowledging that true equality requires addressing specific needs. Misinterpretations of gender equality, such as viewing it as



preferential treatment for women, were noted among male participants.

### **Academic and Institutional Environment**

Experiences varied across departments. Female students in the sciences and IT reported limited leadership roles and unequal access to practical experiences. Some male students perceived a bias favoring female students in grading and leniency. Students from the computing and agriculture faculties noted the underrepresentation of women and the persistence of gender stereotypes. Male students shared concerns about the lack of dedicated common rooms for them, unlike their female peers, who have designated spaces. They highlighted space constraints on campus, noting that university policies restricting mixed-gender seating further limit their options. The issue becomes more severe during the summer, as female students benefit from well-equipped common rooms and larger library spaces, while male students lack comparable facilities.

### **Harassment, Institutional Policies, and Their Effectiveness**

According to the students, they do not face harassment inside the classroom. However, when girls walk around the university campus, some groups of boys make inappropriate comments. Despite this, the regular patrolling by university guards across most areas of the campus helps reduce such incidents and contributes to a relatively safer environment. While participants were aware of the university's anti-harassment policy and the Quick Response Force (QRF), many felt these policies lacked visibility and effective implementation. Every department has a DSA post that completely handles the harassment cases. There was a consensus that gender policies existed but were not actively enforced or communicated.

### **Participation and Representation**

The respondent stated that both girls and boys are given equal opportunities in extracurricular activities, especially in sports. During the annual sports gala, male and female students participate equally, and the university actively promotes gender equality in these events. However, it was noted that many female students still do not take part in sports due to societal pressure and prevailing gender stereotypes about women.

### **Cultural and Social Influences**

Participants identified traditional gender norms and family expectations as significant obstacles to gender equality. These were particularly influential among students from rural backgrounds. Students from rural backgrounds expressed the belief that women are primarily meant for household responsibilities and are not equal to men in terms of roles and capabilities. Peer pressure and societal views continued to impact both male and female students' attitudes and behavior.

### **Conclusion**

The research reveals that most University of Sargodha students are in favor of gender equality, though they are still influenced by progress as well as obstacles from society. The participants grew to see that gender equality is about giving all individuals equal rights, opportunities and taking circumstances into consideration. The university has done a lot to ensure that all students, regardless of gender, can take part in extracurricular activities and feels protected at all times, thanks to the QRF and the DSAs. Because of these actions, the university campus is safer and more balanced. Even so, being in charge of schools often, access to resources and gender stereotypes are issues that remain. The roles men and women should play in society are mostly determined by cultural habits among students from rural areas. This shows that there should be regular campaigns, ongoing gender-based education and strict enforcement of gender equality policies on campus.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the research, the University of Sargodha ought to give gender sensitization workshops regularly, ensure that all support and outreach mechanisms are easy to find and used and grant all genders equal access to its many facilities. Boosting the inclusion of females in leadership, including gender subjects in lessons and

explaining institutional policies can help make things more equitable. Extra care is needed for students from traditional backgrounds and regular checking and reports from students assist in improving gender equality.

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