Padmakanya Multiple Campus:
A Psychosocial Analysis of a First Women's Campus in Nepal

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Abstract

Padmakanya Multiple Cmapus (PKMC) is oldest all-female institution in Nepal, and was examined to better understand the impact of the 'female-only' (single-gender) learning environment on identity development, empowerment, social connection, and stress; thus providing insights into how PKMC has influenced the students' experiences. A phenomenological approach to data collection was followed, and included collecting data from a diversity of 24 individuals (students, faculty, and staff) who attended PKMC through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, non-participant observations, and field notes.

This research aimed to provide a better understanding of the psychosocial experiences of students at PKMC. The thematic analysis identified ten themes of PKMC's psychosocial experience. These ten themes included: 1) safety and emotional freedom; 2) peer solidarity and sisterhood; 3) emerging agency and empowerment; 4) academic pressure and internalized expectations; 5) mental health struggles and stigma; 6) negotiating traditional gender norms; 7) identity exploration and career aspirations; 8) inequalities at the intersection of identities; 9) gaps in faculty support/mentoring; and 10) future orientation/social responsibility. The study found that PKMC is a safe and psychologically empowering environment for the development of leadership skills, peer support, and social engagement in the community. However, there are still issues related to school-related stress, mental health stigma, societal hierarchies, and the two identities imposed by societal expectations. Therefore, this qualitative research contributes to the current growing international and national discourse regarding women's single-sex education with an emphasis on both the benefits of single-sex education but also the psychosocial challenges that continue.

Keywords: *Education, Empowerment, Identity Development, and Mental Health*

Introduction

Padmakanya Multiple Campus (PKMC), is one of Nepal's oldest and first government campuses to offer education exclusively to women. PKMC was established in 1951 AD (2008 BS) as a means

to provide women within Nepal with the opportunity to receive quality education that would help empower women. PKMC has developed a social and cultural environment, where women in Nepal can explore who they are, take control of their lives, and empower themselves within a society dominated predominantly by men. The founding of PKMC and other colleges with similar missions were created because of the systemic barriers that prevented young girls from being able to attend school, including the belief that women were not entitled to an education, the requirement to perform all household duties, restrictions on their ability to move around freely, and the stigma associated with women attending a coeducational institution. PKMC represents one of the most important developments for promoting gender equity in higher education, and it continues to confront the challenges associated with gender equity.

Women's institutions, which exist in many regions around the globe, provide women students with a mechanism for self-empowerment, leading to the formation of self-assurance, leadership, and engagement in the learning environment. Research from multiple global sources reveals that women-only colleges serve as a platform for women to provide resistance to the prevailing academic hierarchy that is dominated by male faculty members and students. The ability for women to engage in open dialogue with faculty and students, participate in classroom discussions without interruption, and develop their identities free from the restrictive nature of co-educational systems of education signifies that women who attend women-only colleges can develop and express their agency (Moubarak, 2022; Peltz, 2021). Similar to what has been identified by researchers in Bangladesh, India, and Japan, women's colleges provide a forum for women to build a supportive community based on a common ethos of pride, and develop tactics for opposing the restrictive social and political systems that restrict women's agency (Shawon et al., 2024).

There are several reasons that make the women's colleges in Nepal extremely beneficial for society. The first reason is that women's colleges provide a secure destination for women to attend school. Many communities within Nepal have traditionally had their daughters' schooling determined or influenced by caste, class, and/or geographical location, and for centuries, there has been a preference for sons to attend school over daughters. In this environment, PKMC provides a socially acceptable location for families to send their daughters to school. Empirical research shows that across Nepal, female educational institutions (such as Peshok Khushi Mahavidyala) are psychologically safe, as well as supportive learning and development environments for women to grow as confident future leaders. For example, by participating in the student government elections, travelling alone, joining leadership-focused student clubs, and establishing an independent perspective on their aspirations beyond the home, young women are afforded the opportunity to develop their potential as leaders through the support of their peers (Shrestha, 2023).

While it is clear that young women are being empowered through higher education, the psychological pressures affecting young women who are attending these educational institutions is less are muddled and more complex, albeit some can be analysed quantitively (Fischer et al. 2010). For example, many of

the female students at PKM College have to balance their responsibilities and commitments associated with going to school, with the additional responsibilities and commitments associated to their families; including pressure to marry, and financial obligations to help pay their way (Payne et al. 2011). In addition, female students face additional stress and strain due to societal expectations to define their goals based on their cultural or social expectations. While many female students have indicated that they have felt empowered through their college experiences, they have also indicated that their families have pushed them towards marriage instead of continuing their education. The overlap of women's colleges and the relationship process provided for many female students is reflective of broader socio-cultural trends that affect the ways that women interact with their families.

Although women around the world feel similar pressures, anecdotal data indicates that women in South Asia are also facing similar pressures. These types of pressures include the high competition for enrolment in women's colleges and achieving success after graduation, the stigma that exists surrounding women's mental health and the increased burden placed on women to provide emotional support and caregiving duties to members of their family. Even today in many cultures, women are still viewed as the primary caregivers and emotional supporters for their families. Research conducted in South Asia reaffirms that although there are opportunities for empowerment and growth on women's campuses, women are often struggling due to societal norms and stereotypes that lead to questions about the importance of women's education and constraints on their aspirations for fulfilment of traditional gender-based roles.

By presenting this information regarding the background for conducting a narrative-based qualitative study, PKMC provides a great opportunity for in-depth qualitative research on the psychosocial realities of women's lives. Much of the research conducted on women's education in Nepal has focused on women's educational participation patterns, academic achievement rates, and gender-related obstacles to achieving an education. While some of this research has documented how women attending PKMC live their daily lives, feel about their situation, cope with challenges, build relationships, define their own freedoms, struggle with defining who they are as individuals, and view themselves as empowered individuals, there is a lack of any narrative-based studies of the complexities of the lived experience of women in the socio-historical context of education in which the academic space of PKMC has been influenced by a variety of conflicting forces throughout history.

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to present an in-depth qualitative account of women's lived experiences of studying at PKMC, utilizing women's own words to capture their psychological and social experiences of their education at Padmakanya Multiple Campus as well as providing insight into how the academic space of Padmakanya Multiple Campus has provided opportunities for women to develop their identities, gain power or empowerment, achieve emotional well-being, cope with academic demands, deal with social pressures from peers/families, and navigate culturally experienced gendered norms. This research also examines women's narratives and learns how women's-only educational spaces present possibilities for psychosocial development, especially as Nepal's sociocultural climate continues to change.

Statement of the Problem

Education is an important tool for empowering women and assisting them to develop as individuals. Education aids women's individual development in the social, personal, and intellectual areas, enabling them to become active participants in their communities. However, due to multiple barriers (including sociocultural norms, economic conditions, and gender issues), women face many obstacles to attaining higher education in Nepal. Historically, there have been many instances (e.g., Padmakanya Multiple Campus) where institutions for women were designed to provide a safe, supportive, empowering educational experience; however, little empirical work has been done to explore the nuanced psychosocial experiences of women attending these institutions. Most national research studies have focused on enrollment and graduation rates, general academic achievement of women, or large-scale gender disparities in higher education, with limited qualitative data about how women at these institutions process their experiences, cope, and form their identities (Shrestha, 2023; Pant, 2023). The international research literature also highlights advantages of female-only campuses (e.g., building student leadership skills, establishing supportive peer networks, increasing student self-confidence) and provides valuable insights into how these factors influence women's success in higher education (Moubarak, 2022; Shawon et al., 2024); however, many important contextual factors (e.g., caste and class, urban-rural differences, local cultural expectations) that are highly relevant to the Nepalese context are still under-researched.

Evidence from local sources shows that many students at PKMC deal with multiple pressures on a daily basis. Some of the common pressures faced by students include academic achievement; familial obligations; and social engagements. Although numerous students report feeling empowered to some degree on campus, many students still have issues with anxiety, sleeplessness, and stress that stem from parental and societal expectations. The majority of students have some type of social network to offer them support (through peer groups), however; many of the needs for emotional support go unmet because there are inadequate formal mental health services available. There continue to be disparities due to class, caste and geography for access and inclusion of female students in a women-only institution.

Research done at the national level shows that majority of Nepalese adolescents girls experience immense amounts of stress during exam periods. Many of the studies done on Nepal's adolescents have been done in way to analyze the experiences of girls and women, yet they lack to provide an understanding of how women who are within gender specific environments experience their social, economic and cultural realities and in what ways this affects their need. The gap in the available research highlights the need to understand deeply, from a qualitative perspective, what it is like for those students (the students at Padmakanya Multiple Campus) mentally and emotionally through qualitative Data. The present study provides context specific, qualitative insights into psychosocil experiences of students within a single women only higher education institution PKMC. Given its phenomenological design, small purposive sample, and localized setting, the findings are not intended to be generalized to all women's educational institutions but to offer in-depth, experience based understanding. This Study,

by filling a noticeable gap in the current research literature, will inform all educational institutions about what Services (Mentorship, Counseling, etc.) we can offer to support the success of their female students. Additionally, data from this study will also support and add to the National and Global Discussions on Importance of Women's Education, Gender-Equity Policy Development, and Psycho-Social Interventions that consider the Culture of the Individuals in Nepal.

Research Question: The purpose of this study is to describe students psychosocial experiences within a women only educational environment and to identify how do students perceive and cope with academic demands, social expectations and mental health challenges?

Research Objective: The purpose of this study is to explore a broad understanding of the psychosocial experiences of students at Padmakanya Multiple Campus (PKMC) by collecting the personal narratives of individual students and to understand how academic demands and social expectations shape students mental and emotional experiences.

Methodology

Using qualitative phenomenological research, this study examined the psychosocial experiences of Padmakanya Multiple Campus students by analyzing and interpreting how they constructed meaning about their identities, and emotional realities in an all-women's educational context. Psychosocial analysis refers to an integrated examination of student's psychological experiences within their social, cultural and institutional contexts. Adopting a psychosocial lens enables a holistic understanding of student's realities that cannot be captured through psychological or sociological approach alone. Twenty-four purposefully selected participants formed the sample to ensure richly informative, relevant data: 18 students (both bachelor and master level), 4 faculty members closely interacting with students, and 2 administrative staff who maintained observation of everyday campus dynamic. Participants were chosen using maximum variation sampling to capture a diversity of experiences based on academic level, socioeconomic background, and engagement in campus activities. The sample size is consistent with qualitative guidelines for phenomenological research, where 15-30 participants are generally sufficient to achieve data saturation while maintaining depth of analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity. Member checking with selected participants enhanced the credibility of the findings and ensured that the interpreted themes accurately reflected participants lived experiences. To better understand the results and to validate the different types of data collected, several different research methods were used. Specifically, data were collected via semi-structured interviews of 40-80 minutes in duration; focus group discussions with 6 students that allowed for exploration and capture of their experiences and narrative collectively; and non-participant observation conducted at various significant campus sites as a means to gain insight into behavioral trends and culture of the campus.

The researcher recorded a large amount of field notes and reflexive journals throughout the study to provide contextual information, reflections, and emerging analytical insights about the participants

and the research. The researcher employed the Braun and Clarke (2006) six-step process for thematic analysis to analyze the data including becoming familiar with the transcripts; generating initial codes; organizing the related codes into categories; developing preliminary themes; refining and defining the major themes; and interpreting the themes based on relevant literature/theory. Member checking with select participants was conducted to ensure the credibility of the conclusions drawn and also to provide triangulation using interviews, observations, and journals, which enhanced the credibility of the interpretations. All of these strategies have given the researcher a very strong basis to analyze thoroughly, consider ethical challenges, and create a rich contextual background for understanding the psychosocial transition process for women at PKMC.

Findings

S.N.	THEMES
Theme 1	Safety and Emotional Freedom
Theme 2	Peer Solidarity and Sisterhood
Theme 3	Empowerment and Emerging Agency
Theme 4	Academic Pressure and Internalized Expectations
Theme 5	Mental Health Struggles and Stigma
Theme 6	Negotiating Traditional Gender Norms
Theme 7	Identity Exploration and Career Aspirations
Theme 8	Intersectional Inequalities: Caste, Class, and Geography
Theme 9	Support, Mentorship, and Gaps from Faculty
Theme 10	Future Orientation and Social Responsibility

Theme 1: Safety and Emotional Freedom

Many participants reported feeling psychologically secure and autonomous when they were at Padmakanya Multiple Campus (PKMC). One participant (P1) described the experience of being at PKMC as finding a *"breathing space"* in contrast to her time in an all-girls school where she felt discouraged from voicing her opinions and fears of ridicule. While attending PKMC she found it easy to raise her hand in class, calling herself "seen but not judged."

Another female participant (P2) from a rural community stated that she experienced street harassment every day while commuting home from her job on public transportation, whereas at PKMC, *"I don't have to turn around; I walk with no fear."* The third participant (P3) mentioned having the ability to ask questions, make mistakes, and engage freely with peers during group activities, attributing this to the emotional security present at PKMC.

In summary, the findings from a recent national research project concluded that having supportive educational environments for females is linked to emotional security for female students (Pant, 2023).

Theme 2: Peer Solidarity and Sisterhood

Many students depend on a system of peers in the form of support networks that help them to stay emotionally stable while they study.

(P4) reported that when she was stressed out studying for exams, her senior classmates provided her with support and comfort to guide her through her studies. She reported, *"All my senior .classmates were very attentive to me and helped me to learn the formulas correctly. They would wait until I was calm and could continue with my studies."*

(P5) said that although she was feeling homesick when she first moved into her hostel, her classmate's support made it possible for her to adapt to the new environment. She reported, *"One of my classmates was extremely kind to me. She brought me tea and sat with me while I talked and cried until I stopped crying. It was like having an older sister."*

(P5's) experience was similar to that of (P6), who felt that through the social and academic support of her classmates, she built new levels of self-confidence and self-esteem that she had never known before attending a coeducation school.

Research conducted in the country of Nepal indicates that female peer support networks provide protective avenues against anxiety and stress (Banstola et al., 2020) in addition, there are numerous examples of other research studies done outside of Nepal demonstrating that women's colleges provide women with the ability to establish sisterhoods and communities that allow them to develop their resilience (Ekwonye, 2018).

Theme 3: Empowerment and Emerging Agency

Through the course of this research, women who participated stated that their increased confidence and ability to be a leader through their participation at a campus could be repeatedly seen in their comments.

Participant 7 mentioned that she joined the debate team due to encouragement from her professors and how her experience at her campus has made her more comfortable with speaking in front of large groups. She expressed that, *"I gained the confidence to speak in front of many people because of my involvement on campus"*.

Participant 8 discussed how she started planning and organizing social action campaigns and stated, *"I realised that I have a voice and I can make change"*

Participant 9 highlighted that PKMC (Pamela K. Moch's Campus) was the spark that ignited her leadership abilities, as well as eliminated her fear of being a leader. She said, *"I was very shy, and now I'm the one leading the team and making decisions for them"*.

According to several **national and international academics**, including Shrestha (2023), women-

only colleges and universities in Nepal have created an environment that supports the success of women. As a result, a greater number of graduates from women-only colleges or universities than those from co-educational colleges or universities, report a higher level of job preparation and leadership skill development.

Theme 4: Academic Pressure and Internalized Expectations

While students have the opportunity to pursue education, many face intense academic pressure.

(P10) stated that she is worried her family will be disappointed in her. *"My parents believe that if their daughter goes to college, she will have a successful future. I feel this puts added pressure on me to show them how right they are."*

(P11) explained that she has had trouble sleeping during exams and cited that *"the way I think about myself is completely tied to society's perception of what a 'good girl student' should be able to do"*.

(P12) felt she was constantly compared to her siblings and peers and added, *"It is not fair that most of the other students in my class are boys, since they attend the same schools I do."*

Nationwide research (Bhandari & Sharma, 2012) has confirmed that female students experience higher levels of examination-related anxiety. International research also links academic stress among women to gendered expectations of perfection and responsibility.

Theme 5: Mental Health Struggles and Stigma

Although the peer support was strong, the formal mental health support remained limited.

(P13) mentioned having anxiety during exams but was reluctant to get support: *"I don't know where to go. I'm afraid the others will criticize me when I say that I am stressed."*

(P14) reported frequent headaches due to stress but thought that *"counseling is for weak people,"* which reflects internalized stigma.

(P15), a faculty respondent, was concerned that there was no counseling unit: *"We see students struggling emotionally, but the institution is not equipped."*

In this regard, Nepali research has also depicted the same barriers. Most importantly, young women all over the world experience cultural and structural stigma in seeking care for their mental health.

Theme 6: Negotiating Traditional Gender Norms

Many of the participants described navigating two separate identities: Empowered at the campus but restricted at home.

(P16) explained: *"I am confident speaking in class. At home, I have to remain silent when elders are talking."*

(P17) reported that she was allowed to attend college but forbidden from participating in extracurricular activities: *"They say girls should study but not 'roam around' in programs."*

(P18) expressed frustration that her academic achievements were overshadowed by family pressure to marry soon.

South Asian literature shows women feeling empowered in educational spaces while negotiating patriarchal expectations at home. In keeping with this general regional trend are the experiences of students at PKMC.

Theme 7: Identity Exploration and Career Aspirations

PKMC allowed for the growth of new hobbies and Thomas's future vision.

Participant 19 said, *"Once I joined a campus organization, I found my love for community service."*

Participant 20 discussed how seeing female leadership inspired her to enter a profession in civil service: *"Seeing women who were successful come to my university enabled me to believe that it was possible for me too."*

Participant 21 said that after learning about social issues, she decided to change her major: *"I learned more about myself through going to PKMC."*

Studies across the United States have found that attending a women only university broadens career possibilities. Internationally, researchers have found that attending women's colleges fosters students' identity development and self-discovery (Riordan, 1994; Kinzie et al., 2007)

Theme 8: Intersectional Inequalities: Caste, Class, and Geography

Marginalised students interact with **school environments** differently than other students, experiencing discrimination and prejudice.

Participant 22 (a Dalit) states that there are *"young women who do not want to sit beside me; however, I try to ignore that it is happening to me,"* but it hurts.

Participant 23 (a low-income rural young woman) states that she did not feel at home in a school where her classmates are rich: *"I can't wear designer dresses or go to expensive restaurants. At times I feel as though I am not seen."*

Participant 24 (the young woman who can't speak English language properly) stated that language is a barrier preventing her from being able to actively participate in school: ***"I talk slowly, and the people are looking at me impatiently; this reduces my confidence."***

Theme 9: Support, Mentorship, and Gaps from Faculty

The support from their professors was greatly appreciated by all students who participated in

this study. However, while the majority of participants were inspired and assisted by many of their professors, most of them reported that other professors were not involved in helping them be successful in school.

Participant P3 remarked that *"some professors really changed my academic life,"* while Participant P9 stated that she had *"rarely had any contact with [certain professors]."*

The variety of comments from the students **reinforces** the findings of Shrestha's (2023) research, which suggested that many students have had experiences with mentoring that do not reflect an overall positive mentoring experience for women at the nation's colleges and universities. Furthermore, these findings align with studies conducted internationally that show that mentoring is one of the most significant factors impacting women in higher education, and that mentoring is often lacking or is of lower quality compared to mentors for male students (Ehrich et al., 2004; Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

Theme 10: Future Orientation and Social Responsibility

The female participants expressed their aspirations to impact positively upon society based upon their experiences with community activism, volunteerism and/or through their upbringing with women of great strength and power in leadership.

Participant 6 commented, *"My education here gives me a feeling of obligation for all the girls who do not have this opportunity."*

Participant 12 indicated that she has a desire to work in the area of education so that children from rural areas have access to safe places to learn.

Participant 20 exhibited an extreme level of commitment to her community when she stated, *"I would like to positively impact my community in a meaningful way."*

The information gathered from research conducted on women's colleges globally indicates that women who have graduated from these colleges tend to be disproportionately more concerned with civic engagement and social justice than their peers at other types of educational institutions.

Discussion

Research shows how women in Nepal benefit from the empowerment and stressors that arise in the psychosocial settings of Padmakanya Multiple Campus (PKMC). Many PKMC participants feel emotionally safe because it is a space where they can be liberated to express their opinions and participate more rather than having to conform to a traditional, patriarchal society. The findings also support the findings of other national, survey-based studies that found women on women-only campuses have a supportive/stable environment (Pant, 2023; Shrestha, 2023) and international research has shown women attending women's colleges experience greater academic confidence and less gender-based harassment than women attending coeducational institutions (Shawon et al., 2024; Moubarak et al.,

2022). The presence of supportive female relationships has been shown to act as a buffer for women to mitigate stress in various forms of literature from Nepal (Kharel et al., 2020) and promote collaborative relationships among women attending educational institutions (Tidball, 2018).

According to participants, being in leadership roles, participating in clubs, or having an active role in their community empowered them to be confident and successful professional women. Women's college programs empower women's agency and prepare them to be successful in their careers. Although participants experienced significant levels of academic stress, the behavior expected of them as women, and mental health struggles, the participants also had a lack of institutional support for women combined with associated shame about seeking mental health counseling. The findings support those of earlier researchers in Nepal (Bhandari and Sharma, 2012; Kharel et al., 2020) as well as researchers worldwide (Eisenberg et al., 2021; Lee and Choi, 2022). Participants developed multiple identities where they felt confident on their campuses while also being constrained by family expectations at home; thus exhibiting the connection between being empowered by an educational institution and being limited in the ability to have autonomy in society as a result of gender norms deeply ingrained in South Asia (Khadka, 2019; Hasan, 2021).

Caste, class, and geography are some of the factors that create intersectional inequities for students today. **This assertion is supported by national research conducted by Thapa (2020) and international research conducted by Crenshaw (2017) and Evans-Winters (2019) on the topic of intersectionality.** Due to the different levels of quality provided when the faculty is supportive, students who are often supported by the same faculty advance mentally, emotionally, socially, and academically from their initial point of entry into a college/university environment. Furthermore, as demonstrated by the women who participated in the study, women attending women's colleges continue to have a strong commitment to being civically engaged (Tidball, 2018; Riordan, 2019). It is evident from this study that PKMC is creating a supportive environment that allows students to discover and develop their own identities; build self-esteem and empowerment; and cultivate their own social consciousness and engagement in their communities. At the same time, this study demonstrates that larger systemic and cultural forces contribute to the stress and poor health of students, as well as affect their sense of agency. In conclusion, PKMC serves as a dual vehicle for developing both empowering students and challenging them as female students.

Conclusion

This investigation includes a thorough examination of the psychosocial lived experience of female undergraduate students at Padmakanya Multiple Campus (PKMC), which is Nepal's first higher educational institution targeted mainly at women, and determines how various characteristics of the institutional context affect female learners' self-image, their degree of empowerment, coping mechanisms for stressors, and sense of social responsibilities. There were eighteen female students who participated in this phenomenological study, which relied on semi-structured interviews, focus group

discussions, observations, and thematic analysis of data. Ten major themes regarding the psychosocial lived experience of female learners were identified, including emotional security and freedom from emotional pain, female student solidarity, female empowerment and the development of agency, academic pressure and the need to develop internal expectations, the struggle with mental illness and stigma, finding the balance between traditional gender roles and the development of a new identity, aspirations for a career, educational inequalities based on marital/caste status, lack of support from teachers, and women's future orientation and social responsibility.

The psychosocial context at PKMC encourages female students to be confident and creates an environment where students create relationships with peers, faculty/mentors, develop civic engagement and leadership skills. The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of previous research on women-only institutions both nationally and internationally having provided a safe and supportive environment for female learners.

In a highly competitive academic environment, women are facing multiple emotional stressors, including: academic pressure; creating conflict between dual identities (immersion in an institution that supports women's empowerment and being restricted at home); and deeply entrenched social hierarchies related to caste and/or class. Yet the majority of institutions lack sufficient mental health support for their students. Thus, these findings indicate that institutions can act as both a source of women's empowerment and a source of further challenges. They provide the means for women to grow their agency, identity, and social responsibility; however, there are deficiencies in the areas of mentorship and counseling, as well as a need to incorporate those who are currently underserved.

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