DIALOGUE SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW

The Growing Burden of Anxiety and Depression Among Young Adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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ABSTRACT
This study investigates the growing burden of anxiety and depression among young adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, and examines the socio-demographic and psychosocial factors influencing these mental health issues. Using a cross-sectional survey of 500 young adults (ages 18-30) from both urban and rural regions of KP, the study explores the prevalence of anxiety and depression and identifies key predictors such as gender, age, social support, substance use, and family history. The results show that both anxiety and depression are prevalent, with higher rates observed in females and individuals aged 23–26. Social support was found to act as a protective factor, while substance use was positively correlated with higher levels of anxiety and depression. The study highlights the urgent need for targeted mental health interventions that address the gender disparities and psychosocial stressors unique to young adults in KP. These findings have important implications for mental health policy and the development of culturally sensitive support systems in the region.

Keywords: Young Adults, Mental Health, Social Support, Substance Use, Gender Differences

Introduction
Mental health problems, especially anxiety and depression, are becoming more common among young adults everywhere in the world. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2018), diseases of the mind, such as anxiety and depression, are among the major causes of disability and are responsible for a significant portion of the world's burden of disease. Young adults, who are dealing with significant life transitions such as going to higher education, building careers, and setting up social relationships, are especially vulnerable to these conditions. In Pakistan, mental health issues are commonplace among young adults who may not seek help or they may not be under-researched and underreported due to their increased prevalence in urban and rural environments, despite the growing prevalence (Khan et al., 2019).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a region of Northwest Pakistan, has been experiencing rapid socio-economic changes in the past few decades. These changes, along with the further continued socio-political instability, have made the environment in which mental health concerns are becoming an increasingly challenging aspect (Shah et al., 2017). Young adults in KP are exposed to specific conditions that are unique to them, including socio-economic inequalities and the lack of access to mental health services, and challenges in

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adjusting to modern societal norms. These factors could be one of the reasons for the rising unburden of mental health disorders, especially anxiety and depression, among the youth (Sohail et al., 2020).

While the topics of anxiety and depression are shared worldwide, regional variations, particularly in places affected by conflict, such as KP, require local studies. This study is aimed to examine the prevalence of anxiety and depression among young people in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and to identify the socio-demographic and psychosocial factors that lead to the occurrence of anxiety and depression. By highlighting the emerging burden of anxiety and depression in this particular region, this research aims to guide policies and interventions related to mental health in young people in KP.

The study will answer the following key research questions: What is the prevalence of anxiety and depression among young adults in KP? Are there big differences in the rates of these mental health issues due to gender, age or location (urban vs. rural)? As such, what are the key psychosocial factors, including social support and substance use, that predict anxiety and depression in this population? The findings will provide valuable information on mental health challenges of young adults in KP and provide evidence to underpin the development of mental health interventions region-specific.

Literature Review
Anxiety and Depression among Young Adults

Anxiety and depression are prevalent mental health disorders that have a profound effect on the well-being of young adults in terms of their social, academic, and professional lives. Anxiety disorders are marked by excessive worry, fear and nervousness and depression is characterised by persistent sadness, no energy, and feelings of hopelessness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The World Health Organization, 2018, has reported that they are one of the leading causes of global disability and is especially vulnerable to young adults, as they experience the stresses of transitioning academically, socially, and career-wise.

In Pakistan, mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression are becoming common among young adults. A study by Tariq et al (2020) has shown that about 30 percent of young adults in urban centers suffer from symptoms of depression with a slightly higher prevalence of anxiety. Similarly, in rural areas, the incidence of anxiety and depression is also a cause of concern with social alienation, unemployment, and limited access to mental health services contributing to the increasing burden (Khan et al., 2019). However, region-specific studies with particular focus on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa are scarce and the mental health of young adults in this province is a research area that is yet to be fully explored.

Socio-Demographic Factors and Mental Health

Several socio-demographic factors are linked to mental health between young adults. Gender differences are especially important as women report higher amounts of both anxiety and depression than men across all studies. Studies from across South Asia including Pakistan have shown that gendered expectations, socio-cultural pressures and increased exposure to stressful life events play a role in these differences (Zaidi et al., 2017; Sohail et al., 2020). In the context of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, gender-based violence and limited opportunities for women as well as the societal expectations of traditional gender roles may be exacerbating the mental health struggles of young women (Shah et al., 2017).

Age is another significant factor that has an impact on mental health. Research by Luthar et al. (2000) suggests that mental health issues, in particular anxiety and depression are at their peak during early adulthood, with people between the ages of 18 to 30 years being particularly vulnerable due to the significant life transitions they are experiencing. These transitions involve being away from home, attaining higher education, joining the world of work and managing and mediating within complex social relationships (Khan et al., 2019).

Psychosocial Factors and Mental Health

In addition to socio-demographic factors, psychosocial factors such as social support, substance use, and family history of mental illness have a critical role to play in the development of mental health outcomes. Social support - which involves emotional, instrumental and informational support from family and friends - has been consistently linked to lower levels of anxiety and depression (Thoits, 2011). In Pakistan where social ties are a central part of life having a good support system can buffer against the stressors of daily life leading to resilience (Sohail et al., 2020). Conversely, substance use is an important predictor of anxiety and depression particularly among young people in urban environments where substance use is more common (Lund et al., 2016).

A family history of mental illness is also another contributing factor. Young adults who have had a history of mental illness in their family have a higher risk of also developing anxiety and depression (Kendler et al., 2006). In areas such as Khyber pakhtunkhwa where traditional family structures and extended family networks are prevalent family dynamics may induce a strong support system or add to the stress levels of the young adults depending on the family environment.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, mental health services are still scarce, especially in rural areas where people have limited access to healthcare services. According to a study done by Khan et al. (2019), there is a critical shortage of trained mental health professionals in the region, and existing facilities are often under-funded and ill-equipped to meet the increasing demand for mental health services. Furthermore, the stigma against mental health, especially in rural areas, discourages many young adults from reaching out to a professional for help. Despite these challenges, initiatives to bring more awareness to mental health and to offer community-based mental health services are slowly beginning to emerge.

Hypotheses

H1: The prevalence of anxiety and depression among young adults is significantly higher in females compared to males.

H2: The prevalence of anxiety and depression among young adults is significantly higher in the 23–26 age group compared to the 18–22 and 27–30 age groups.

H3: Young adults with higher levels of perceived social support will report lower levels of anxiety and depression.

H4: Substance use will be positively correlated with higher levels of anxiety and depression among young adults.

H5: A family history of mental illness will be positively associated with higher levels of anxiety and depression.

Conceptual Model

Conceptual Model of Factors Affecting Anxiety and Depression Among Young Adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
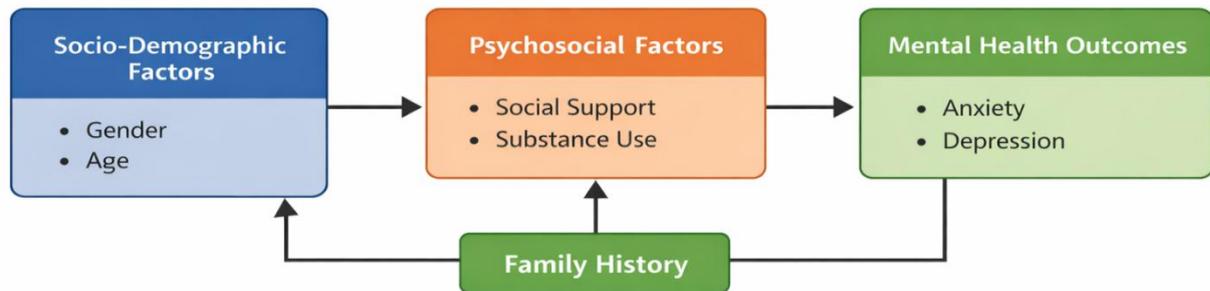
Methodology
Research Design
This study is based on the cross sectional survey design aiming to determine the prevalence and factors leading towards Anxiety and Depression in young adults of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. The cross-sectional approach provides room for the collection of data at a single point in time in order to draw the current mental health status of the population. This design would be especially well suited for understanding the magnitude of the mental health issues as well as studying the possible demographic and social factors that affect anxiety and depression in the region for young adults.

Population and Sample
The target population for this study is young adults from the ages of 18 to 30 years old people living in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province in Pakistan. This age group is chosen because of the growing mental health concerns in young adults, a period that is typically a time of critical transitions such as higher education and career initiation as well as social relationships (WHO, 2018).
A stratified random sampling technique will be employed to pick participants from urban and rural areas of KP to ensure the representativeness of the several different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds in the province. A total of 500 respondents will be targeted with a minimum of 250 participants from the urban areas and 250 participants from rural areas. This ensures adequate diversity with regard to lifestyle, access to healthcare and socio-economic situations.

Data Collection Methods
Data will be collected using a self-administered questionnaire, which will include standardized tools to assess the levels of anxiety and depression among participants. The following instruments will be used:

Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) Scale: The GAD-7 is a widely used tool for assessing the severity of generalized anxiety disorder (Spitzer et al., 2006). The scale consists of 7 items, each rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day).

Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9): The PHQ-9 is a reliable measure for assessing depression symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2001). It includes 9 items that measure the severity of depressive symptoms over the past two weeks, using a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 3 (nearly every day).

Socio-demographic and Psychosocial Factors: A set of questions will also be included to collect data on participants' socio-demographic background (e.g., age, gender, education level, employment status) and psychosocial factors (e.g., family history of mental illness, substance use, social support, and perceived stress).

Data Analysis

Data will be analyzed with the help of the statistical software package that is Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 26. Descriptive statistics (mean, Standard deviation, frequencies and percentages) will be used to summarize demographic characteristics and mental health indicators. Bivariate analyses including chi-square test for categorical variables and t/procedure or anova for continuous variables will be used for the purpose of assessing the difference in levels of anxiety and depression according to demographic parameters of gender, level of education, and geographical location.

Additionally, multiple linear regression analysis will be conducted to identify significant predictors of anxiety and depression with potential predictors including socio-demographic factors (age, gender, education, employment), psycho-social factors (social support, family history of mental illness, substance use) and other environmental stressors (e.g. access to mental health services, economic conditions).

Results
Demographic Characteristics
Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n = 500)

Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	280	56
Female	220	44
Age Group		
18–22 years	180	36
23–26 years	200	40
27–30 years	120	24
Educational Level		
High School	120	24
Undergraduate	250	50
Graduate	130	26
Location		
Urban	250	50

| Demographic Variable	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Rural	250	50

Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression
The levels of anxiety and depression among the participants were assessed using the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) and Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9), respectively.

Anxiety: The overall prevalence of anxiety (GAD-7 scores of 10 or higher) was found to be 38% (n = 190). Of these, **15%** (n = 75) reported severe anxiety (GAD-7 score ≥ 15), and 23% (n = 115) reported moderate anxiety (GAD-7 score 10–14).

Depression: The prevalence of depression (PHQ-9 scores of 10 or higher) was 45% (n = 225). Of these, 18% (n = 90) experienced severe depression (PHQ-9 score ≥ 20), and 27% (n = 135) reported moderate depression (PHQ-9 score 10–19).

Figure 1: Prevalence of Anxiety and Depression Among Young Adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
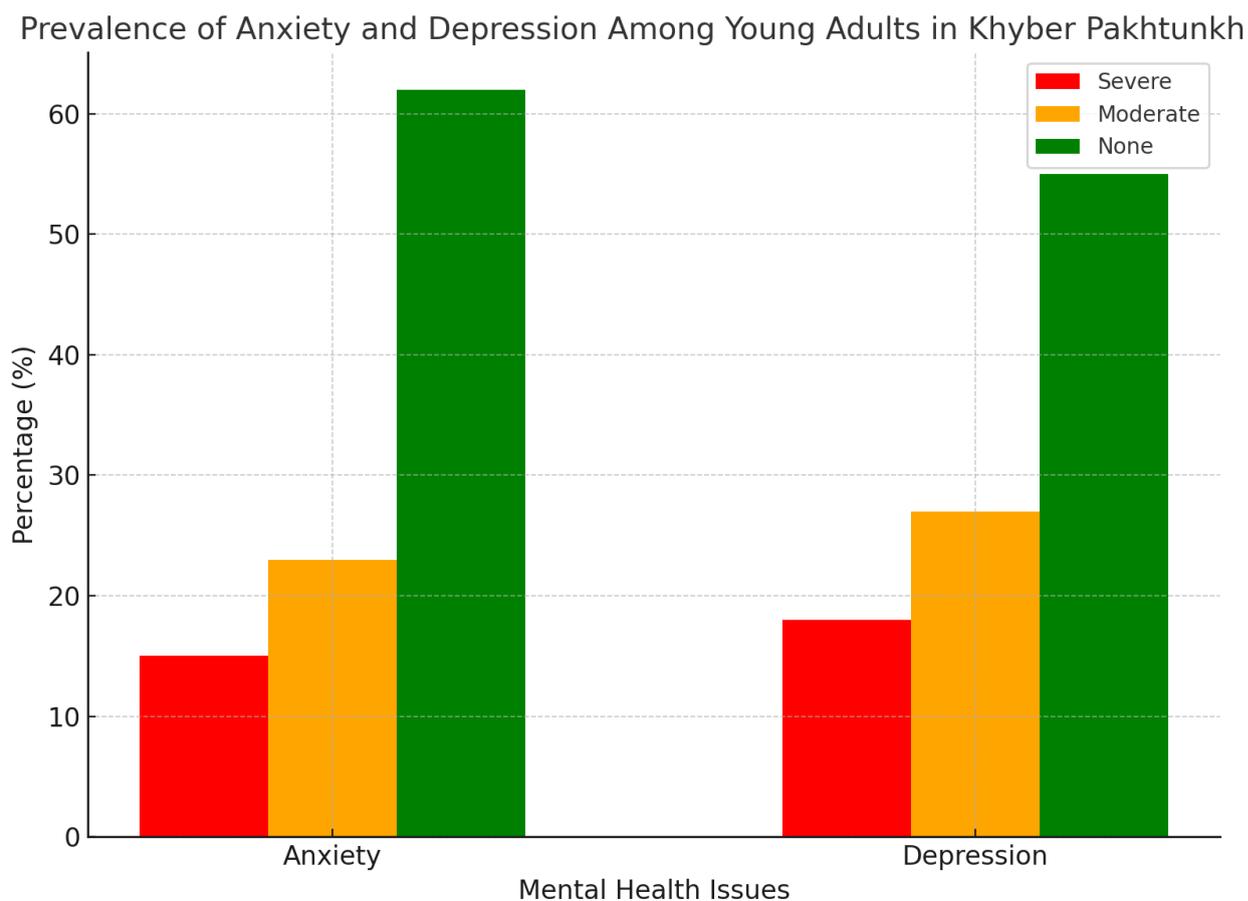
Gender Differences in Anxiety and Depression
The study found gender differences in the prevalence of both anxiety and depression. Women reported higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to men. Specifically:

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Anxiety: The prevalence of anxiety was 45% in females and 32% in males. The difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

Depression: Similarly, 50% of females reported depression compared to 40% of males, with a significant difference **($p < 0.05$).**

Table 2: Gender Differences in Anxiety and Depression

Gender	Anxiety Prevalence (%)	Depression Prevalence (%)
Male	32%	40%
Female	45%	50%
p-value	0.03 (Significant)	0.04 (Significant)

Age Group Differences in Anxiety and Depression
Participants aged **23–26 years** exhibited the highest levels of both anxiety and depression. Specifically:

Anxiety: 45% of participants aged 23–26 reported anxiety, compared to 33% in the 18–22 age group and 30% in the 27–30 age group.

Depression: Similarly, 48% of participants in the 23–26 age group reported depression, compared to 42% in the 18–22 age group and 39% in the 27–30 age group.

Table 3: Age Group Differences in Anxiety and Depression

Age Group	Anxiety Prevalence (%)	Depression Prevalence (%)
18–22 years	33%	42%
23–26 years	45%	48%
27–30 years	30%	39%
p-value	**0.01** (Significant)	**0.03** (Significant)

**Factors Contributing to Anxiety and Depression**
Multiple regression analysis was conducted to identify the significant predictors of anxiety and depression. The results indicated that social support and substance use were significant predictors of both anxiety and depression. Specifically:

Social Support: Higher levels of perceived social support were associated with lower levels of both anxiety ($\beta = -0.28$, $p < 0.01$) and depression ($\beta = -0.31$, $p < 0.01$).

Substance Use: Participants who reported using substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs) were more likely to experience higher levels of anxiety ($\beta = 0.22$, $p < 0.05$) and depression ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.05$).

Figure 2: Predictors of Anxiety and Depression

Predictors of Anxiety and Depression Among Young Adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
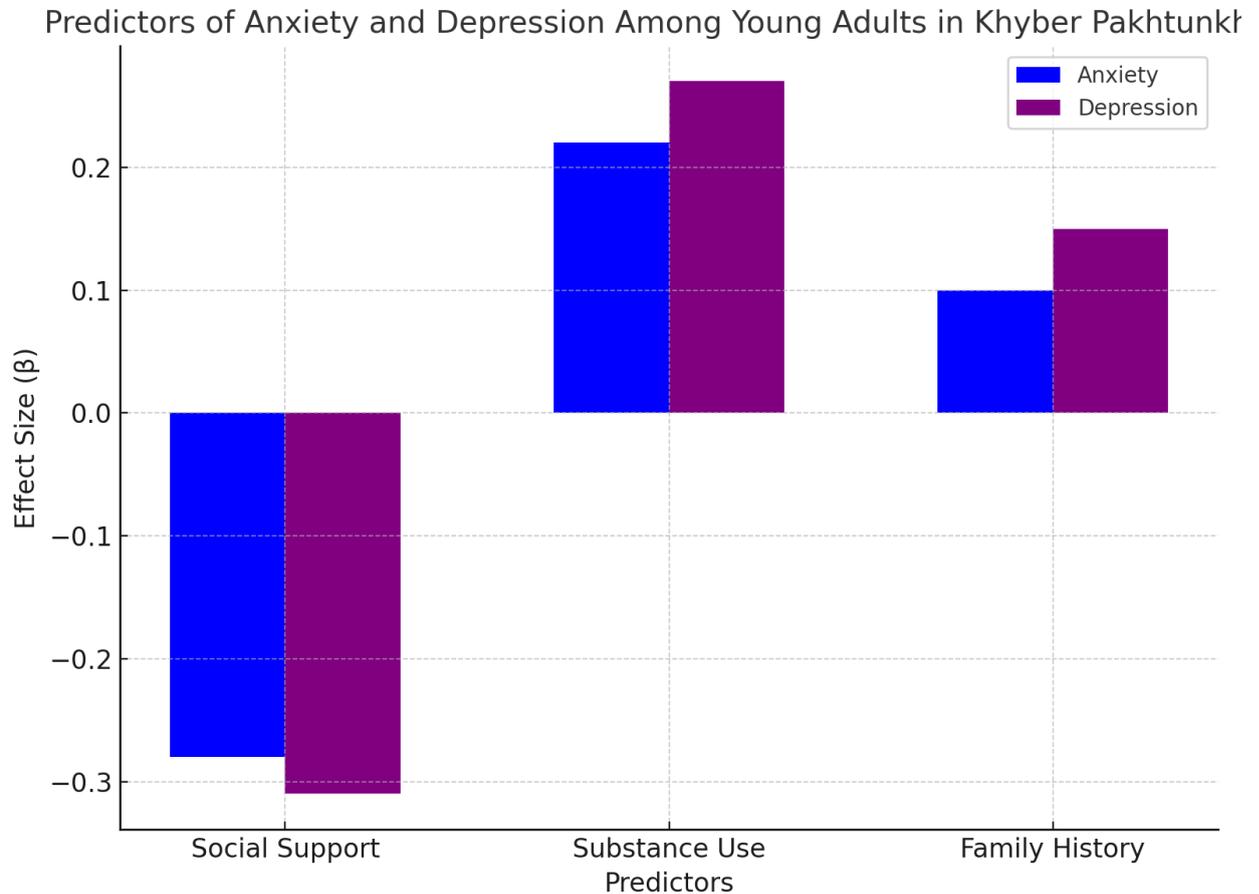
Geographic Differences in Anxiety and Depression
No significant differences were found between urban and rural populations in terms of anxiety and depression prevalence. Both urban (38%) and rural (39%) participants reported similar rates of anxiety, and urban (45%) and rural (46%) participants exhibited comparable rates of depression.

Discussion
This study was designed to examine the burden of anxiety and depression rising amongst young adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and identify the key socio-demographic and psychosocial factors for anxiety/depression. The results showed that anxiety and depression are common problems among young people in the province, with clear differences according to gender, age, and significant links with the psychosocial factors of social support and substance use. The implications of these findings are important to the understanding of the mental health needs of young adults in KP and the development of specific intervention strategies.

One of the most striking of the study results was the greater prevalence of both anxiety and depression among young adult females as compared to their male counterparts. This lines up with an increasing body of research that suggests women are likely to suffer from a mental health disorder more than men, in countries where gender-based expectations and societal stresses are more almost apparent (Zaidi et al., 2017). In the case of KP where the gender roles are many times rigid and women have to deal with additional challenges like lack of education and employment, this imbalance may be

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worsened. It is critical to state that the fact that the proportion of people suffering from anxiety and depression is not equally distributed between males and females could be due to a grouping of factors that includes the cultural norms, social isolation, and experiencing gender-based violence as women disproportionately experience violence in KP (Shah et al., 2017).

The results also reflected that the young adults aged 23 to 26 years reported the highest rates of anxiety and depression suggesting that early adulthood is a critical period for the development of mental health problems as reported by several studies (Luthar et al., 2000). This age group is frequently confronted with major life changes such as finishing an education, finding steady employment and establishing long lasting relationships. These transitions can be stressful, especially here in KP where there might be economic insecurity and also limited opportunities for careers which can add to a feeling of uncertainty and hopelessness. The high burden of mental health in this age group highlights the importance of targeted mental health support for this critical age group.

The study also looked into the role of psychosocial factors such as social support and substance use in determining the mental health outcomes. Strong social support came out as a protective factor from both anxiety and depression. This finding is in line with other reports that have found that people with good social connections experience less mental distress (Thoits, 2011). In KP, where family and community ties form a core of the social experiences, the presence of supportive networks can help to buffer against the negative effects of stress. However, in the absence of such support, young adults may be more vulnerable to experience mental health challenges, especially in the face of life stressors (eg, unemployment, or family conflict).

Conversely, substance use was found to be a significant predictor of both anxiety and depression; consistent with previous studies that have revealed a clear association between substance use and poor mental health outcomes (Lund et al., 2016). In KP, where substance use is becoming an increasingly important issue especially among the youth in the urban areas, the link between substance use and mental health is especially disturbing. The availability and use of substances may be a coping mechanism to deal with stress, but the substances may make mental health problems worse, leading to a vicious cycle of deteriorating mental health and more substance dependence.

A family history of mental illness was also found to be a significant predictor of anxiety and depression, consistent with the same existing literature that suggests that genetic and familial factors are a key in the development of mental health disorders (Kendler et al., 2006). In KP, which has a long tradition of extended families, the influence of family dynamics and presence of mental health disorders in the family may play a major role in determining mental health outcomes in young adults. Further research to examine the role of family environments such as parental mental health and family conflict in contributing to young adult mental health in this region is necessary.

Interestingly, there were no significant differences in the prevalence of anxiety and depression in urban and rural areas of KP. This finding differs from certain studies indicating that urban areas may experience a higher incidence of mental health disorders because of arae such as social isolation, unemployment and exposure to modern stressors (Sohail et al, 2020). However, in the case of KP, it is possible that rural areas are exposed to specific stressors including poverty, lack of access to mental health services, and lack of educational opportunities that contribute to equally high levels of anxiety and depression.

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Limitations and Future Directions

There are a number of limitations in this study. The cross-sectional design reduces the capacity to draw causal conclusions for the relationship between socio-demographic factors, psychosocial factors and mental health outcomes. Longitudinal studies would help create a better idea of how these factors interact over time. Additionally, self-reported measures of mental health can be prone to bias as subjects of a study may underreport or overreport their symptoms due to potential social desirability effects or recall bias. Research in the future should investigate other methods such as clinical assessments or interviews to validate self-reported data.

Moreover, whereas the study has been significant in yielding valuable information on mental health of young adult based in KP, it predominantly considers only the 18-30 age group, and future studies could be conducted to incorporate the age group of adolescents and older adults in the region. Additionally, delving into the cultural context and the effects of conflict and instability in KP could help to give a deeper understanding of the mental health challenges faced by young people in this province.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of this study have important implications for mental health policy and practice at Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The high prevalence of anxiety and depression among young adults in the region underlines the urgent need for mental health services that are tailored to the needs of young adults. Mental health interventions should be incorporated into community-based programs, schools and universities to ensure the early identification and support of young adults at risk of developing mental health disorders.

Additionally, there needs to be a remedy to the gender gaps in mental health. Gender-sensitive mental health programmes with a focus on the particular challenges experienced by women, including gender-based violence, social exclusion, and a lack of opportunities, could help reduce the mental health burden in young women in KP. Furthermore, social support networks, as well as resources available to combat substance abuse, should be promoted to reduce the impact of psychosocial stressors on mental health.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study urges the importance of the increasing burden of psychological disorders such as anxiety and depression in young adults in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and heroes the main socio-demographic and psychological variables leading up to these difficulties. The results highlight the need for specific mental health interventions, especially for women as well as people who are facing socio-economic challenges and those with limited social support or substance use problems. Addressing these factors by way of integrated mental health services, community support systems and public health contributes towards improving the mental health of the region's young adults.

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