

Female Students' Enduring Struggle for the Room of Their Own

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Abstract

Drawing inspiration from Virginia Woolf's call for financial independence and creative space for females in her seminal essay, *A Room of One's Own*, this study utilizes data from an easily affordable university to illuminate the persistent challenges and aspirations shaping the contemporary pursuit of personal and academic autonomy among women of 21st-century in higher education. Woolf argued that social and material conditions, such as leisure time, privacy, and financial independence, are essential for creative writing. Historically, women have been consistently deprived of these essential prerequisites. Data collected from tertiary-level students in the middle to lower-middle economic classes show that the situation has not changed significantly. Unlike literary creative productions, their study and achievements are often hindered by the absence of necessary prerequisites. Overcoming these obstacles requires raising awareness, providing proper education, and enabling individuals to achieve financial independence.

Keywords: Woolf, 21st-century females, struggle, Bangladeshi context, higher education.

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Introduction

The publication of Virginia Woolf's groundbreaking essay *A Room of One's Own*, in 1929 ignited a meaningful discussion on the prerequisites for women's intellectual and artistic autonomy. Woolf notably claimed in her essay that women cannot wholly pursue scholarly interests, especially in literature, unless they have financial independence and a literal or metaphorical space of their own. Her advice remains relevant almost a century later while female higher-education students navigate their pathways. Woolf said, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction". (Woolf, 1929, p. 3)

Based on Woolf's observations, this research explores the ongoing fight in modern academia for a private 'room' for female students and the obstacles and goals influencing their quest for academic and personal liberty.

Virginia Woolf claims that the development of intellectual endeavors depends on social and material conditions. Privilege, access, and opportunity are interwoven throughout the very fabric of academia, and these elements have historically privileged male researchers at the expense of their female counterparts. Woolf mentioned that if William Shakespeare ever had a sister with equal intelligence and upbringing, she wouldn't have been able to be a writer due to the lack of opportunities. "I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a sister; but do not look for her in Sir Sidney Lee's life of the poet. She died young—alas, she never wrote a word." Woolf also mentioned, "It would have been impossible,

completely and entirely, for any woman to have written the plays of Shakespeare in the age of Shakespeare." (Woolf, 1929, p. 36).

The inquiry is set against the painful backdrop of Woolf's exploration of women's social and economic constraints when attempting to access creative spaces. She emphasized the value of free time, privacy, and financial independence as essential preconditions for writing, all of which have historically been denied to women.

The central part of the study is contemporizing Woolf's findings in terms of the female students of the 21st century in South Asia. This study examines explicitly one hundred and seven female students from middle to lower-middle-class economic backgrounds. To scrutinize the reality these students experience in a postsecondary educational setting. The data indicates a shift in the status of women, as evidenced by the hundreds of female students who, despite their conservative society, were able to finish their secondary school and were preparing to pursue a higher degree. Their family history, financial situation, and social standing seldom encourage higher education. They are more interested in finding themselves employed in women's traditional roles as childrearing machines, preoccupied with housework.

It has never been easy to manage to start higher studies with hundreds of obstacles with uncertainty of completion. The struggle to manage time, tuition fees even permission to attend classes and examinations put them under anxiety and tremendous mental pressure, which they often conceal in fear of further humiliation.

Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, there is still resiliency and willpower. Driven by a quest for intellectual fulfillment and self-actualization, female students are paving their routes. They are trying to make their own spaces in the academic environment by raising awareness, educating themselves, and pursuing financial independence to reclaim areas that have long been denied.

We begin this investigation of the transforming potential of education and the ongoing significance of Woolf's call to action. We may endeavor to create a more equal and inclusive academic environment where everyone has the chance to succeed and flourish by comprehending the complexity of the modern female student experience. In this regard, Virginia Woolf suggests financial independence that can certify the freedom of choice and that some personal space is the ultimate way to pursue intellectual and creative endeavors for females.

Significance

The idea of *A Room of One's Own*, as defined by Virginia Woolf and her contemporary feminist writer Sarah Grand's ideal of the "New Woman," continues to influence arguments about women's autonomy and empowerment in modern culture. Woolf made the case—which encompasses larger themes of agency and equality—that women must have access to physical space and financial freedom to properly pursue their intellectual and creative endeavors. Grand also laid the foundation for contemporary feminist movements by supporting women's rights and their freedom from conventional gender norms.

The quantitative part of this study specifically collects data directly from the students regarding their

situations in society, family, and educational institutions and the specific problems they face in real life in a particular social, economic, and geographical setting, which may not claim a generalization but certainly an attempt of finding the problems and as well as the solutions behind the backward positions of female in a creative endeavor or intellectual advancement. The data collected from more than a hundred students enriches the existing quest for knowledge of the causes, effects, and solutions of the enduring struggles of female students.

In their pursuit of autonomy, women now encounter various obstacles, such as discrepancies in income, unequal access to resources, and social expectations. Beyond literature, women pursue this goal in various professions, including university and entrepreneurship, where their contributions are respected and their voices are heard. Woolf and Grand's beliefs provide a framework for navigating these challenges and motivate efforts to build a more equal and inclusive society in which each woman can follow her passions and determine her own identity.

Woolf's Resonance in Bangladeshi Context

Within the sociocultural context of Bangladesh, Woolf's concept has a timeless resonance. For Bangladeshi women, access to higher education remains a barrier despite notable advancements over the past century. Many Bangladeshi females are under pressure to marry young and have children due to cultural and familial expectations stemming from a social trauma of uncertainty. The dread of not finding a suitable husband is a significant factor in this socio-cultural system, in addition to the father's financial

difficulties, which motivate a woman to pass her obligations to her husband.

The in-laws of a girl are afraid of her dominant personality, which develops with her maturity and education, and they expect her to follow the rules and conventions of the new family. Self-reliance by earning money might help a girl resist patriarchal dominance. Being a mother entails many household tasks and tightens the bonds with the family. Female self-imprisonment is guaranteed by the child's social shelter, financial support, and patriarchal identity. Communication with the outside world may become a barrier to taming an earner, and a woman's employment and income frequently threaten authority. That increases limitations or restricted mobility associated with this financial reliance on the family for tuition payments.

The conservative religious norm of “parda” literally and socially prevents women from freely pursuing their goals and exploring who they are. When the country's less protective unstable defense and administration continues to allow numerous rapes, abuses, and violent attacks on women, or when women are attacked or bullied outside, this restriction becomes more rigid. As a result, too many aspects of gender, class, and religion intersect to prevent students from pursuing higher education.

The Metaphor of “Room” in Bangladeshi Context

In Bangladesh's sociocultural setting, the symbolic room is an exceedingly needed reserved space where a woman can freely think, express, and create without interference.

However, this room is illusive for many Bangladesh i female students, who find it shaped and constrained by deeply ingrained patriarchal norms, financial dependences, and cultural expectations.

Women frequently live alongside siblings or other family members, making it difficult to study or think quietly. There is hardly any notion of personal space. Women are frequently unable to claim even a symbolic space of their own if they are not economically independent. Many young women have started creating symbolic chambers in digital places since no rooms exist. They can connect with classmates, explore ideas, and access resources through social media platforms, online study groups, and virtual learning environments. The idea of a room in Bangladeshi culture can also refer to group areas where women encourage and support one another. Female students can feel empowered and be included through mentorship programs, community libraries, and women-only study groups. These collective spaces can be an alternative to a real collective community to share knowledge and challenge societal obstacles. These collective spaces function as shared “rooms” where women can challenge societal norms, share knowledge, and build solidarity.

Colonial Legacy and Gender Norms in South Asia

Woolf's claim that women must have access to resources and education to attain intellectual independence draws attention to the historical fight for women's educational access in South Asia, which colonial legacies have made worse. A similar discriminatory approach was mirrored in South Asian colonial educational systems, where women's education was limited to affluent

metropolitan neighborhoods and frequently designed to support their household responsibilities.

Although Woolf's primary focus was on gender, her concepts can be expanded to address issues of intersectionality. Colonialism strengthened caste and class hierarchies in South Asia, disproportionately affecting underprivileged women. Her acknowledgment of structural obstacles is consistent with current feminist endeavors to democratize and decolonize access to possibilities.

Literature Review

Numerous academics and researchers have emphasized the importance of

researching female students' education and finding their difficulties and solutions. Several feminist writings also emerge, echoing the importance of women's empowerment, their education, and the obstacles of society all over the world. Specially Virginia Woolf, wrote about the challenges faced by the females to become an artist in her seminal essay, *A Room of Ones Own*; and the obstacles of female artists in pursuing careers and achieving financial independence In her novel, *To the Light House*.

Education for girls is about more than access to school. It also has to do with ensuring that girls feel encouraged and safe in the topics and vocations they choose to pursue, even those in which they are frequently under-represented. (*Girls' Education*, n.d.)

An international webpage named Global Citizen listed seven obstacles to girl's education and how to

overcome them. They found poverty, child marriage, menstruation, household chores, gender biased violence, conflict and crisis around the world, and human trafficking are the main obstacles and attempted to find solutions. (Rodriguez, 2019)

Some studies exclusively focus on a particular group of females in a specific geographical location, and Bangladeshi female education is also brought into light in several writings, in several forms. A recent article by Shahin Akhter, published in New Age, an online news portal, brought to light remarkable informative findings about the current situation of female education and careers in Bangladesh. It shows that women cannot maintain success and excellence in their journey toward higher education and careers.

According to Bangladesh Education Statistics 2022, published by the Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics, the proportion of female students at the secondary level in schools and the secondary level of madrasas was more than 50%. However, only 37.33 percent of female students were enrolled in 2022 at 163 public and private universities, according to the University Grants Commission's 49th annual report. Women continue to be underrepresented in higher education, even though they score higher on Secondary School Certificate tests and earn higher grades. (Akhter, 2024)

The article by Shahin Akhter (2024) also revealed that the combined results of SSC and HSC examinations in the past five years show that girls outperformed boys every year. Despite that, fewer women showed signs of academic excellence at the tertiary level. The ratio of employed

women in comparison to men reduces even more. Latest Quarterly Labour Force Survey 2023, out of 7.11 crore employed people in the country, the number of employed men is 4.64 crore and the number of employed women is 2.46 crore. (Akhter, 2024)

The struggle of female students is a subject that can be researched from different perspectives in different settings. Once a critical obstacle for females is gradually cracked, another level of problem arises. Even in the same setting, the problems differ in different places, in different social classes, and even in different families. So, the search will continue as long as gender shapes human life.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to explore the contemporary relevance of Virginia Woolf's theoretical framework regarding *A Room of One's Own* in the context of undergraduate female students of the 21st - century. These students are dwellers of Dhaka, Bangladesh, a South Asian Muslim country, and belong to middle or lower-middle-class families, who are mostly conservative in terms of the upbringing and education of their daughters. Their economic class can be considered from middle to lower middle class as the university costs affordable tuition that can be paid by the students themselves with a part-time job or a little support from the family. Scholarships or even full waivers are also offered to students with excellent grades at the secondary level.

The rationale for selecting this particular group of students of this specific university is the convenience of collecting data as it is the long-term working place of the researcher. The students are selected from the Department

of English, where the ratio of female students is greater than that of male students. The geographical position of the university in the northern part of the capital allows students from both the city and the less developed towns and urban side. The affordable tuition allowed students from lower to lower-middle class students. The university has no barrier to admitting married or students with a study gap. This selection of this particular student group seems to generalize the typical majority of the female students of Bangladesh and South Asia.

Drawing inspiration from Woolf's seminal essay, theoretical insights were synthesized to inform the development of a survey instrument to collect empirical data on the experiences and challenges faced by female students in accessing personal and academic autonomy.

The data were collected using a Google Form distributed to undergraduate students from a particular discipline within the university. The author distributed the Google forms through Google Classroom created previously for class assignment purposes and the responses were taken in seven days, dated from October 22-28, 2023. No name, class ID, or email address were asked or recorded to ensure the participants' privacy. The survey consisted of closed-ended and open-ended questions designed to gather quantitative data on factors such as economic status, obstacles in education, and perceptions of academic and personal autonomy faced explicitly by females, as well as qualitative insights into participants' lived experiences and aspirations.

The rationale for selecting Google Forms as the source of data collection is that the students were already introduced to and enrolled in different Google Classrooms

for their courses and had extended time and privacy to reply. Alternatives like in-depth interviews, focus groups, or classroom discussions could have added detailed information but seem to hamper privacy.

One hundred seven female undergrad students voluntarily participated in the survey, providing valuable responses that were subsequently analyzed using quantitative and qualitative methods. Quantitative data analysis involved descriptive statistics to summarize and interpret key findings related to participants' socio-economic backgrounds, academic experiences, and perceived barriers to autonomy.

Thematic coding of open-ended replies was used in qualitative data analysis to find recurrent themes, patterns, and narratives from participants' qualitative reports. Through iterative coding and thematic analysis, common themes and nuanced viewpoints were uncovered to provide a thorough knowledge of the lived experiences and difficulties experienced by female students in their pursuit of autonomy within the university setting.

Efforts were made to derive actionable insights to address the identified challenges and enhance the academic and personal autonomy of the female students. Based on the findings of both quantitative and qualitative investigations, feasible solutions were proposed. Grounded in Virginia Woolf's theoretical framework, the recommendations aimed to foster a more inclusive and empowering environment, promoting social justice and gender equality in higher education.

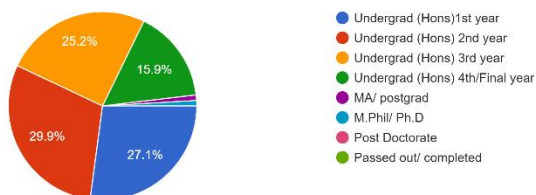
Data Analysis

Twenty-four questions were placed in the Google form questionnaire, titled "The Struggles of Female Students," posted in Google Classrooms, clearly mentioning that it was a survey for academic research and that only female students were assigned. Access to the form was kept open for responses for seven days and was closed when the target of a hundred students was reached. A total of 107 responses were in the Excel sheet.

Of 107 voluntary responses within the week, 105 were from undergrad students; 57.9% had no study gap, but 42.1% already had a gap in the study.

What is level of your study at the moment?

107 responses



The vast percentage of students having a study gap is the first trace of struggles in the participants though the reasons were not collected.

The next question was about the students' target for higher studies. 46.7% wanted to complete post-grad, 20.6 % wanted to achieve a Ph.D. degree, but 29% were satisfied to complete only graduation. It was just a wild imagination, but almost one-third of the students could not think of a post-grad that was offered in the same institute

they study in, and admission for post-grad is offered without any further admission test or time gap.

The next response was optimistic: 84% wanted to be self-dependent with a job after completing the study, and 14% were self-motivated. Unfortunately, 65% of them felt insecure about their future career because they were female. 23% of the participants struggled without any support from family and managed everything by themselves, while the rest got good support from the family. Twenty percent of them paid the tuition fees by themselves.

When asked, "Do you think studying at the university level is tougher for a female student?" 35.5% said 'yes' and 32.7% answered 'maybe.' More than 67% of students find higher education more challenging for females.

95% do household work, and 20% are compelled to do it even before exams and during extremely tough academic situations. 64% of them face problems attending classes. 68% say that they get a 'good environment' at home to study, which is very optimistic news. Still, it is quite subjective in terms of what they think to be 'good' from the environment they have come from, with or without any comparative discussion, as the majority does not reveal all family problems openly.

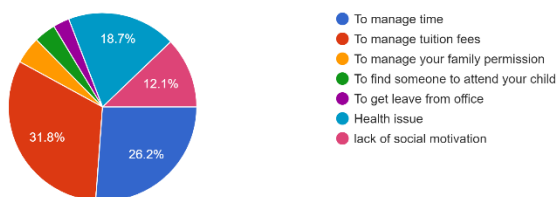
Next, information was found that 27% of undergrad students were already married, and 12% had already had children.

Sexual harassment is always a concern for female students. Their responses reveal that 14% of them face it in public transport and 10% in the institute, which does not

seem to be a significant number, but the presence of sexual harassment is disturbing, and how much of it is concealed due to the fear of further harassment always remains a big question.

The following information showed multiple answers, according to their situations, about the obstacles to their studies-

What is the most difficult obstacle for your study?
107 responses

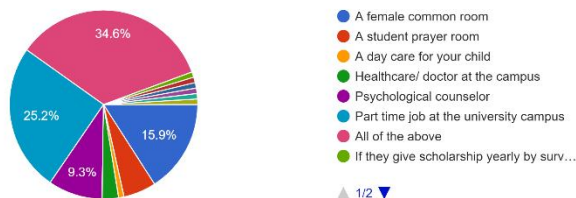


The biggest portion, 31.8 %, found the tuition fees and 26.2% the time management to be the main obstacles. Young Undergrad students are supposed to be young and in good health, but sadly, 18.7% mentioned health issues as the obstacle, and 12% do not find social motivation to study. The rest ticked problems like taking leave from the office, not finding permission from the family, and not having a supportive hand to take care of the children.

The next question was about the solution to the obstacles.

What do you think could have helped/ helps your study at your institution?

107 responses



In the end, a box was given to be filled out in an open-ended way, asking if they had anything else to share, and some exciting and interesting data came out from their responses. The given box in the Google form to share if anyone wanted to add anything was optional; out of 107, only 38 students wrote in the box, where 8 of them wrote they had nothing else to share or N/A. So, there were 30 who mentioned what they wanted with emphasis. 9 students out of 30 wrote about struggles to pay and want more waivers or reductions in tuition fees. Some want part-time jobs on campus, and two want online classes as they need to do full-time jobs to pay tuition.

Out of 30 responses, 9 asked for a 'psychological center,' psychologist, female help desk, or mental support from teachers when they are distressed. Some did not mention these points but mentioned they are tremendously under pressure to manage the tuition fees or struggle to get permission to attend classes or exams, in anxiety about whether they will be able to continue or not. This huge portion of 30 optional replies does not demonstrate the

whole picture, but the rest of the 77 participants may think alike, and the ratio is supposed to be similar. Some heartbreaking points were revealed like one has an eight-hour job and feels very tired and cannot manage time to study or attend classes as she has to do a lot of household work too. Three students wrote that they are in trouble after marriage, and their in-laws do not want them to continue studying nor want to allow them to come to the university. Few mentioned that their families are too poor to bear the cost so they had to drop a few semesters. One mentioned that she has to work very hard at home to get support from her family to continue studying, and it is impossible to make others understand what she goes through.

Discussion

The issue of paying tuition fees is the main conclusion drawn from the data analysis above, and it strongly echoes Woolf's theory. Students have no other way but need money for scholarly or creative development. On the other hand, the idea of "room," the space and scope for studying, is vastly subjective. Even the conditional continuation and controlled access are the greatest expectations for some wretched of the earth. Having a personal space or room is unimaginable for some financially weak students; they always share their room with siblings or a granny, while having a whole room does not even come to their wild dreams. So just getting some scope to read may be their "good" environment, but attending classes, coming out of home, and spending much of the day is tough. That may explain the contrasting data of 64% having a good environment for studying at home but the struggle of 68% to attend classes. These tertiary students are true warriors who have already completed the path of at least 12 years of

academic enrollment, but many shed before they get to this point.

Solutions

Several proposals to address the challenges faced by female students can be envisioned based on the information gathered:

Financial assistance

More financial assistance programs, such as scholarships, tuition fee waivers, part-time jobs on campus, short-term payment systems, and student loans, are required in light of the large percentage of students experiencing financial difficulties. Developing targeted financial aid programs for marginalized female students, for example, supporting laws that lessen the cost of education for students, particularly those from low-income families, can help them feel less stressed about money.

Mental Health Support

It is crucial to offer sufficient counseling or mental health support services because stress and anxiety are common among students. By creating a psychological center or granting students access to support groups and counselors, safe spaces can be created where they can talk about mental health issues and get help when they need it. A friendly teacher-student rapport is the easiest way to solve numerous difficulties before they get too critical.

Gender-Sensitive Policies

Promoting an inclusive and safe environment that gives students the confidence to report harassment is crucial to fostering an inclusive and respectful campus culture. Developing support systems like female help desks and awareness campaigns, as well as implementing gender-sensitive policies, are necessary to address issues of sexual harassment and gender inequality.

Academic Program Flexibility

Providing flexible academic programs, such as online courses, short-term courses between semesters, and weekend programs, can help ensure greater accessibility and participation in higher education. Flexible academic programs acknowledge the diverse needs and responsibilities of female students.

Childcare Center

A childcare center for the students having babies, and no helping hand to care for them at home will be greatly helpful.

Create Mentorship Programs

Creating mentorship programs and pairing female undergraduates with professional women can inspire and guide them to be independent. NGOs aiding helpless women can be brought under collaboration.

Community Support

Establishing networks of support within and outside of the university can provide students with more resources and help. Fostering peer support networks, mentorship

initiatives, and community collaborations can foster a feeling of unity and belonging among students encountering comparable difficulties. Providing scope for the development of rapport, like common rooms, canteens, and different clubs, can also provide relief during anxiety.

Advocacy and Awareness

Two essential first steps in tackling structural barriers to education are raising public awareness of the difficulties experienced by female students and pushing for institutional and governmental policy reforms. Initiating significant change and fostering a more encouraging atmosphere for female students can be achieved by including stakeholders, such as teachers, administrators, policymakers, and community leaders, in advocacy efforts and discourse.

Inspire Inclusion

The official United Nations theme for International Women's Day 2024 was "Count Her In: Invest in Women. Accelerate Progress". (*International Women's Day 2024 | IWDA, 2024*)

Every government, organization, and entrepreneur must ensure and inspire this inclusion to help the females and thus move forward toward prosperity. Trusting women's abilities and skills and training them to prove their capacity is necessary for women and the smallest unit of society, the family. The upgradation of women's empowerment is only possible through the education of females, which will be inspired by the inclusion of females in every sector of the economy.

By implementing these recommendations, academic institutions and legislators can endeavor to establish a more equal and encouraging learning environment that enables female students to succeed both personally and academically.

Limitations

The enduring struggle of females in education, at primary or higher levels or throughout their lives, is also an enduring research subject. Based on a group of undergrad students of a low-cost university, this study does not necessarily generalize the scenario of the females worldwide, nor the females of different social classes. The language of the Google form was English which is not their mother tongue. So, the students comfortably answered the objective questions, but only one-third attempted the open-ended additional part where they could have contributed more personal experiences. The data were collected only from the female students; it would be more prosperous in content when done in a broader range of social classes, and parallel data will be collected from male students and analyzed comparatively. Further, the language barriers could be overcome if they could take oral opinions in their mother tongue. Still, the study reveals a bunch of interesting and important information that will be of great use in attempts to find solutions for the struggles of female students.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf highlights the value of women's intellectual freedom, personal space, and financial independence. Many Bangladeshi women students now struggle financially, which restricts their access to high-

quality instruction and educational resources. Woolf also criticizes social conventions restricting women's intellectual independence by limiting them to predetermined roles. She also emphasizes that many female students in male-dominated fields lack role models and visibility. Providing financial assistance, setting up specific study areas, fostering intellectual independence, elevating female role models, supporting gender equality in school, and addressing societal expectations are all examples of workable solutions motivated by Woolf's theories. We can establish workable solutions to empower female students and foster an atmosphere that honors their opinions, aspirations, and goals by taking inspiration from Woolf's ideas.

The collected data reveal female students' complex and diverse challenges in higher education. These include financial hardships, mental health struggles, and gender-based discrimination, all of which hinder their pursuit of academic and personal freedom. Structural adjustments and focused interventions must be made to give female students access to a more welcoming and encouraging atmosphere.

Ensuring equal access to education, addressing financial obstacles, finding part-time work options, providing mental health support services, and applying gender-sensitive rules to deal with discrimination and harassment are important steps in creating a welcoming and safe campus community. Institutions of higher learning and legislators can work towards removing structural obstacles and promoting an egalitarian and female-empowering culture in higher education by promoting legislation reforms and increasing public awareness of the particular difficulties experienced by female students.

Doubtless, these are factual but too ancient findings during the last few centuries to bring an end to the enduring struggles. Still, now, female students at the tertiary level of their education face almost similar problems that Virginia Woolf found during the early 20th century in England, that women could not contribute to the literary stream due to their lack of economic freedom and privacy. The historical limitations on women's access to education and the arts emphasize the patriarchal systems that have deprived them of these possibilities. There are not enough female voices in literature and other professions because they cannot access education and creative spaces not the lack of skills and intellect.

Helene Cixous, a feminist writer of the late 20th century, proposed the potential of “*ÉCRITURE FÉMININE*” (feminine writing) and called it 'White Ink.' (Cixous, 1975). “According to Cixous, a woman must she must “write her self” which means they must write about their own self and take steps to secure a space in the text, into the world and into history” (Amin, 2017). That means that to raise the women's voice women have to write themselves about their own experiences in their own language.

This is a study by a female author who attempted to collect data directly from 107 female students of tertiary level to bring to light their real-life experiences, struggles and obstacles during their study, their source of money, and their way of managing tuition fees and time to study after taking care of families. This study can inspire other females to continue their fight in the journey of higher studies. This research can add to the body of knowledge already in

existence and aid in understanding the challenges that must be overcome to establish a road toward light.

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