



BACKBONE WITHOUT A SPOTLIGHT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON PAKISTAN'S MOST OVERLOOKED HEALTHCARE HEROES

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ABSTRACT

Background

Emergency department (ED) nurses in Pakistan play a critical role in acute care delivery but often remain underrecognized. Despite being the frontline workforce in life-threatening situations, they encounter systemic barriers, including limited professional development and workplace appreciation.

Methods

This qualitative study employed a phenomenological approach using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Thirty registered nurses (18 female, 12 male) from urban EDs in Pakistan, each with a minimum of three years of post-graduation experience, were selected via purposive sampling.

Results

All participants demonstrated a strong understanding of their clinical roles, but only 66.7% reported feeling appreciated in their work environment. Major challenges included long working hours (33.3%), low salaries (40.0%), and lack of mentorship (26.7%). Nurses recommended structured mentorship programs, improved compensation, and formal recognition systems. Comparative insights showed that nurses in Pakistan face more significant institutional and systemic challenges than their counterparts in high-income countries.

Conclusions

While ED nurses in Pakistan exhibit strong professional identity and commitment, they remain under-supported in terms of mentorship, remuneration, and institutional recognition. Addressing these deficits through policy, infrastructure, and educational reforms is vital to retain a resilient emergency nursing workforce and improve care outcomes.

Keywords: Emergency nursing, Pakistan, qualitative study, professional recognition, nurse retention, healthcare workforce, mentorship, burnout

INTRODUCTION

Nurses serve as the backbone of emergency departments (EDs), providing rapid assessments, critical care interventions, and emotional support to patients and families during high-stress, life-threatening situations¹. Their ability to coordinate care, manage trauma, and collaborate with multidisciplinary teams makes them an indispensable component of emergency medical services worldwide². In well-

structured healthcare systems, emergency nurses are not only valued for their technical skills but are also empowered through professional development, leadership opportunities, and institutional recognition³.

In Pakistan, however, the contributions of emergency nurses are frequently overlooked. The healthcare system, strained by workforce shortages and limited resources, often places a disproportionate burden on nurses without offering adequate compensation, growth opportunities, or psychological support. While doctors tend to receive most of the institutional and societal acknowledgment, nurses despite their proximity to patients are commonly viewed as secondary providers. This results in chronic undervaluation, role ambiguity, and professional dissatisfaction among nursing staff.

The emergency department setting intensifies these challenges. Nurses in EDs must navigate erratic workloads, unpredictable shift patterns, resource scarcity, and critical decision-making with limited autonomy. Furthermore, their role in disaster response, trauma care, and acute medical crises has increased significantly in recent years, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite their expanding responsibilities, there remains a notable gap in recognition, policy support, and career progression frameworks for nurses in emergency medicine within Pakistan.

Given the rising burden of non-communicable diseases, increasing patient volumes, and an overstretched healthcare infrastructure, it is crucial to understand how emergency nurses perceive their roles, challenges, and the extent to which they feel appreciated within their institutions. This study seeks to capture the experiences of ED nurses in urban tertiary care hospitals in Pakistan and aims to identify both the systemic gaps and opportunities for reform. Through qualitative inquiry, the research will provide insights into how policymakers and hospital administrators can better support this often overlooked yet essential segment of the healthcare workforce.

Objectives:

To understand how emergency nurses perceive their roles.

To explore the level of appreciation and recognition nurses feel in their workplaces.

To identify major challenges faced by emergency nurses in Pakistan.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, phenomenological approach was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 30 registered nurses (18 female, 12 male) currently working in emergency departments in urban hospitals in Pakistan. All participants had a minimum of three years of post-graduation experience. Purposive sampling was used to select participants.

Findings:

- **Understanding of Role:** All 30 nurses clearly articulated an understanding of their roles in the emergency setting, indicating strong professional identity⁴.

- **Appreciation and Recognition:** 20 out of 30 participants reported feeling appreciated and recognized for their work, citing positive interactions with doctors, patients, or administrators⁵.

- **Challenges Faced:**

- **Long Working Hours:** Reported by 10 nurses as the biggest challenge⁶.

- **Low Salary:** Cited by 12 nurses as a major concern⁷.

- **Lack of Mentorship:** Highlighted by 8 nurses as a key barrier to professional development⁸.

Questionnaire**Participant Information**

Detail	To be Filled In
Participant Code or Name	_____
Gender	_____
Age	_____
Years of Experience	_____
Hospital / City	_____
Date of Interview	_____

Opening & Consent

“Nurses were explained about conducting a study to better understand how nurses working in emergency departments view their role and the recognition they receive in the healthcare system. There are no right or wrong answers—just their honest thoughts and experiences. This conversation was recorded on paper, with permission, and Questionnaire filled simultaneously”

All interviews conducted after taking consent.

Interview Questions**A. Understanding the Role**

1. Can you describe your typical day working in the emergency department?
2. What do you see as your main responsibilities and duties?
3. How would you describe the importance of your role in emergency care?

B. Perceptions of Recognition

4. How do doctors and hospital administrators treat emergency nurses, in your experience?
5. Do you feel appreciated or recognized for your work? Can you give an example?
6. Have there been moments where you felt undervalued or overlooked? What happened?

C. Challenges and Barriers

7. What are the biggest challenges you face in your role?
8. Do you feel you are provided with enough support, training, or resources to do your job effectively?
9. How does the workload or stress impact how you're treated or valued?

D. Professional Identity and Growth

10. How do you view your professional identity as a nurse in emergency care?
11. Are there opportunities for growth, promotion, or recognition in your workplace?
12. How does the public perceive nurses, in your opinion—especially in emergencies?

E. Recommendations

13. What changes would you like to see to improve recognition or support for nurses in emergency settings?
14. What advice would you give to new nurses entering this field in Pakistan?

RESULTS**Table 1: Participant Demographics (n = 30)**

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	18	60%
Male	12	40%
Minimum Years of Experience	≥3 years	100%
Work Setting	Emergency Department	100%

Table 2: Understanding of Role

Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Understand their professional role	30	100%

Table 3: Feelings of Appreciation and Recognition

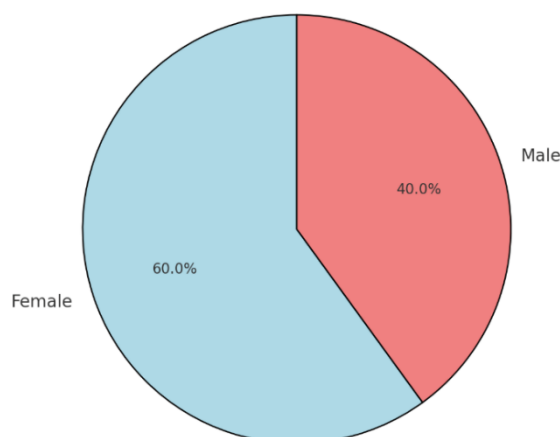
Response	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Feel appreciated	20	66.7%
Do not feel appreciated	10	33.3%

Table 4: Major Challenges Faced by Emergency Nurses

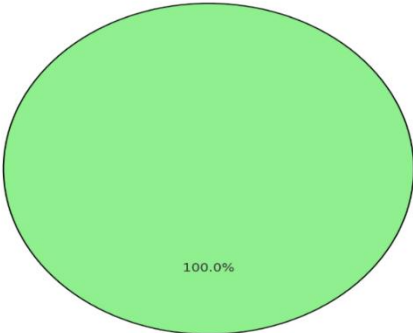
Challenge	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Long working hours	10	33.3%
Low salary	12	40.0%
Lack of mentorship	8	26.7%

Table 5: Nurses' Recommendations for Improving Work Conditions

Recommendation	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Provision of hostel facilities	15	50%
Provision of transport facilities	18	60%
Competitive salaries (like government setups)	20	66.7%
Opportunities for administrative positions & career growth	17	56.7%
Learning modules with mentorship	22	73.3%

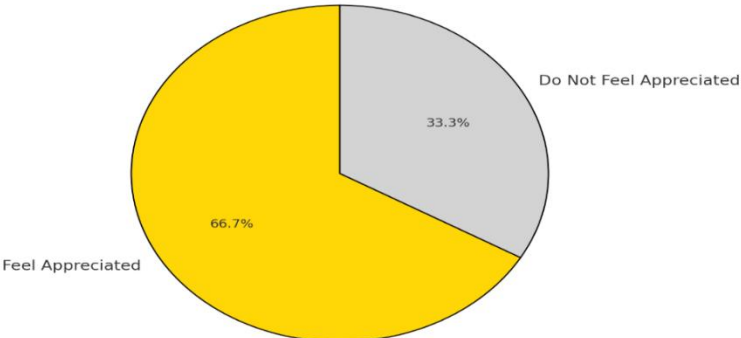
Participant Demographics (Gender)

Understanding of Role

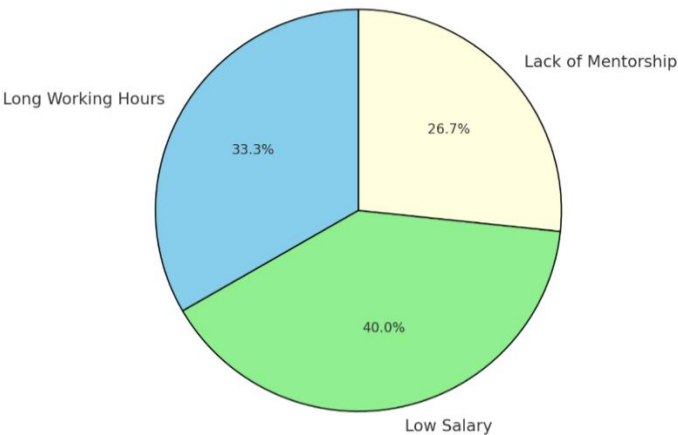


Understand Role

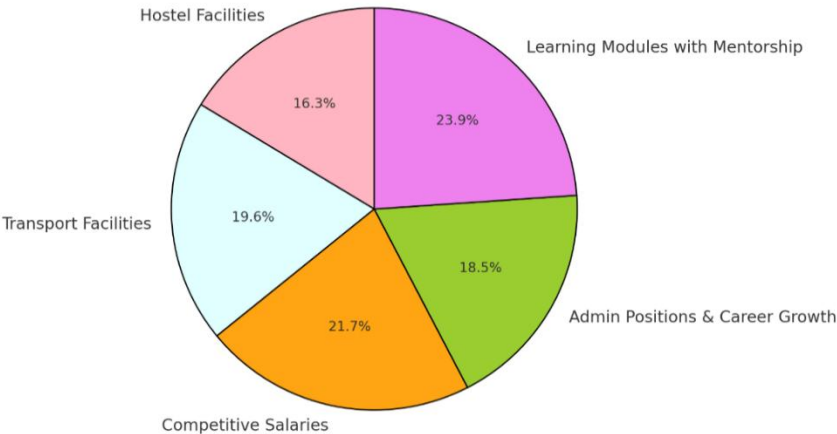
Feelings of Appreciation and Recognition



Major Challenges Faced by Nurses



Nurses' Recommendations for Improvement

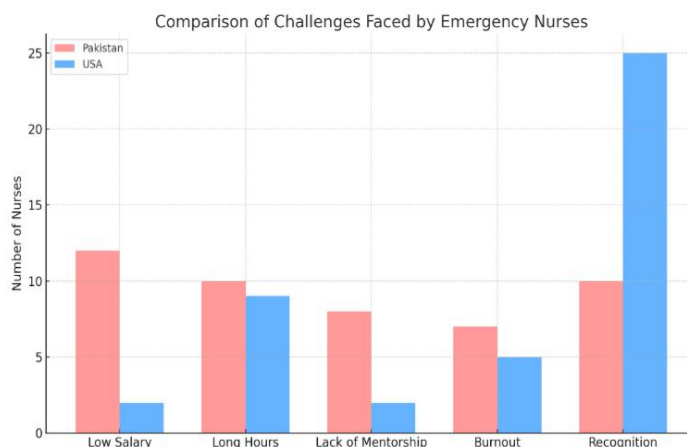


Pie charts based on the tables:

- 1. Participant Demographics (Gender)** – Showing the distribution of male and female nurses.
- 2. Understanding of Role** – All participants understand their roles.
- 3. Feelings of Appreciation and Recognition** – The proportion of nurses who feel appreciated versus those who do not.
- 4. Major Challenges Faced by Emergency Nurses** – Highlights the top challenges faced by nurses (long hours, low salary, and lack of mentorship).
- 5. Nurses' Recommendations for Improvement** – Illustrates the key suggestions provided by nurses to improve their work conditions.

Comparison: Emergency Nurses in Pakistan vs. USA

Aspect	Pakistan	United States
Role Understanding	All nurses demonstrated a strong understanding of their roles.	Strong professional role identity; roles often well-defined and specialized.
Appreciation & Recognition	66.7% feel appreciated; recognition is inconsistent across institutions.	Generally higher; nurses often respected and publicly appreciated.
Work Hours	Long working hours reported as a key challenge (33.3%).	Hours mostly regulated with breaks.
Salary	Low salary is a major issue (40%).	Competitive salaries; ED nurses earn ~\$70,000–\$100,000/year depending on state.
Mentorship & Growth	26.7% cited lack of mentorship; limited opportunities for leadership roles.	Structured mentorship programs, continuing education, and career ladders exist.
Workplace Support	Limited hostel/transport facilities; poor infrastructure.	Institutional support is more robust—well-equipped EDs, mental health support.
Professional Development	Informal learning; few structured training modules.	Mandatory CEUs, frequent certifications (e.g., ACLS, PALS), formal mentorship.
Job Satisfaction & Burnout	Moderate to low, depending on institution; burnout is common.	Burnout exists but mitigated with wellness programs, support systems.
Policy & Regulation	Inconsistent enforcement of staffing or shift policies.	Governed by national/state nursing boards; safe staffing legislation in some states.



Here's the bar graph comparing challenges faced by emergency nurses in Pakistan and the USA. It highlights stark contrasts in issues like salary and mentorship, with significantly higher recognition reported in the U.S.

Graphics:

- Pie charts representing gender distribution, role understanding, appreciation levels, key challenges, and recommendations.
- Bar graph comparing key challenges faced by nurses in Pakistan vs USA.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to understand how emergency department (ED) nurses in Pakistan perceive their roles and the recognition they receive within the healthcare system. The results underscore both the dedication of these professionals and the persistent systemic challenges they face.

All participants demonstrated a strong sense of professional identity, clearly articulating their responsibilities in high-stress emergency environments. However, the data revealed a significant gap between the perceived importance of their roles and the level of institutional and societal recognition received. While 66.7% of nurses reported feeling appreciated, a sizable portion still felt overlooked or undervalued in their workplace interactions. This finding aligns with broader patterns in South Asian healthcare systems, where nursing is often seen as subordinate to medicine⁹.

One of the most prominent themes emerging from the study was inadequate compensation. With 40% of participants citing low salaries as a major challenge, it is evident that current remuneration structures fail to reflect the complexity and critical nature of emergency nursing. Compared to Western nations where nurses receive competitive wages and benefits¹³, Pakistani nurses struggle with financial insecurity, which can negatively affect morale, retention, and quality of care delivery.

A lack of mentorship and career progression was another major concern, reported by 26.7% of respondents. Without access to structured guidance or clear promotional pathways, nurses experience professional stagnation, which further contributes to dissatisfaction and attrition. This is in stark contrast to countries like the United States and the UK, where mentorship programs, clinical ladders, and continuing education requirements are well-established^{12, 14}.

The burden of extended working hours was a recurrent issue, with one-third of the sample identifying it as their biggest barrier. Long shifts, irregular hours, and insufficient staff-to-patient ratios increase the risk of burnout and reduce the ability to deliver consistent care¹¹. Furthermore, these working conditions are often compounded by a lack of emotional and administrative support from hospital leadership, increasing stress levels and affecting patient safety outcomes¹⁵.

An international comparison reveals a stark disparity in institutional infrastructure. In high-income countries, nurses benefit from well-defined job roles, psychological support programs, and access to leadership roles¹⁶. In Pakistan, however, the hierarchy in clinical settings often limits nurses' decision-making power, and their input is frequently excluded from critical policy and operational decisions.

This institutional disempowerment can lead to disillusionment and disengagement, further weakening the healthcare system's human resource capacity¹⁰.

Despite these challenges, the nurses interviewed displayed resilience and commitment to their work. Many recounted positive experiences with patients and doctors, which contributed to their sense of purpose. Their ability to maintain professional pride in the face of systemic adversity is commendable and signals an opportunity for reform. It is evident that when nurses feel recognized and are provided with growth opportunities, their job satisfaction and performance significantly improve¹⁷.

To address these issues, hospitals and health policymakers must implement structural reforms. These include revising pay scales, introducing mentorship programs, offering regular professional development sessions, and formally recognizing nurses' contributions at both institutional and national levels. Providing logistical support, such as transport and accommodation—especially for female staff—can also improve workplace accessibility and reduce daily stressors.

Investing in the nursing workforce is not only a matter of fairness but a strategic necessity for healthcare system strengthening. A supported and empowered nursing cadre translates into better patient care, improved emergency preparedness, and overall healthcare resilience.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of emergency nurses working in urban hospitals across Pakistan. These professionals serve at the frontline of acute care, managing a diverse array of life-threatening conditions while maintaining patient safety and emotional stability in high-pressure environments. Despite this essential role, the study highlights a troubling disconnect between their contributions and the recognition they receive within the healthcare system.

Emergency nurses consistently demonstrated a strong understanding of their clinical responsibilities and expressed deep dedication to their roles. However, the findings reveal that this commitment is often met with limited institutional support. A significant proportion of participants reported experiencing inadequate appreciation, constrained growth opportunities, and systemic undervaluation. Low salaries, long working hours, and the lack of structured mentorship emerged as the most pressing challenges undermining both morale and retention.

Comparative insights further emphasize the disparity between the nursing environment in Pakistan and that in more developed healthcare systems. In high-income countries, emergency nurses benefit from robust support mechanisms, including well-defined career pathways, mentorship programs, continuing education, and policy-level recognition. The absence of such frameworks in Pakistan results in a loss of skilled nursing professionals to burnout, dissatisfaction, and even emigration.

To address these issues, healthcare leaders must implement targeted reforms. Structured mentorship, leadership roles for experienced nurses, fair remuneration aligned with workload, and formal recognition systems are essential. Improving infrastructure and providing logistical support such as transport and hostel accommodation can also help retain nursing staff, especially female nurses who face additional barriers.

In summary, the sustainability and quality of emergency care in Pakistan are directly tied to the wellbeing and empowerment of its nursing workforce. Elevating the status of nurses through systemic change is not merely a professional imperative, it is vital to ensuring equitable, resilient, and responsive healthcare delivery for all.

Author Contributions

(1)TH contributed to the study conception, crafted the research framework, and conducted in-depth interviews with participants. He also provided critical revision of the manuscript.

(2)SA was responsible for the qualitative data analysis and development of visual summaries, while also making contributions to the drafting and refinement of the discussion and results sections.

(3)HJ oversaw the entire research process, made contributions to literature review, and facilitated access to institutional data sources.

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