

HRDN LEARNING SESSION REPORT
HRDN WELLBEING INITIATIVE

Wellbeing & Stress Management

in Today's World

Understanding Stress, Managing Emotions & Finding Your Balance

19 August 2026 | Islamabad

Women Welfare & Development Center (WWDC), Islamabad

Organized by:

Human Resource Development Network (HRDN) in collaboration with the Ministry of Human Rights (MOHR)

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Executive Summary

On 19 August 2026, the Human Resource Development Network (HRDN), in collaboration with the Ministry of Human Rights (MOHR), organized an interactive session on “**Wellbeing & Stress Management in Today's World**” at the Women Welfare & Development Center (WWDC), Islamabad. Twenty-six participants took part, including students and the women staff and teachers of the Center. The session was facilitated by Dr. Naima Hassan and was the first activity under the HRDN and MOHR collaboration.

Rather than lecture, the session moved through five connected parts: an orientation on mental health and wellbeing at the workplace; a presentation on stress and coping, covering what stress is, where it comes from, how it shows up in the body, mind and behavior, and how to manage it; a color-and-circle drawing exercise; guided stretching and breathing; and a six-month reflection that led into discussion on “moving on” and self-care. The session closed with a vote of thanks by Ms. Robeela Bangash and Ms. Shabana Nawaz, Director Social Welfare. Participants left with a shared vocabulary for stress, a handful of practices they can use at their desks and in their homes, and the reassurance that asking for help is a strength.

Highlights

- **26 participants**, including students, women staff and teachers, in a fully participatory session.
- Mental health presented as a **continuum**, with the signs of poor wellbeing at work and what organizations and individuals can do.
- Stress defined as the body's response to a threat, a challenge or a change, and shown to **slow thinking and decision-making**. It was also explained as a normal, and sometimes useful, survival response.
- Stress explained in **three types** (basic, cumulative and critical incident) and **three phases** (alarm, adaptation and exhaustion), with a clear map of its physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioral signs.
- **Adaptive and maladaptive coping** set side by side, with practical steps for today, for the long term, and for supporting a colleague.
- A **color exercise** in which participants gave personal meaning to five colours.
- **Five simple stretching and breathing exercises** that can be done seated, in under five minutes.
- Participants' own drawings and notes showed what weighs on women's minds: family and household responsibility, health and time pressure, held alongside faith, nature, hope and love of family.

Key message

Take a pause, understand yourself, feel better and move forward.

1. Background

Emotional well-being is an essential part of overall health and quality of life. It is a person's ability to understand and manage emotions, cope with everyday challenges, keep healthy relationships and respond to stress in constructive ways. In a fast-paced world, personal, professional and social pressures weigh heavily on mental and emotional health, which makes awareness of stress management especially important in workplaces and learning environments, where people carry many responsibilities and expectations.

Recognizing the need for healthier and more supportive environments for women, HRDN, in collaboration with MOHR, designed this session specifically for women at work and in learning. It was the first activity under the collaboration between the two organizations, and it turned a partnership into a practical, people-centered activity. By focusing on something often overlooked in professional development, the emotional and mental well-being of individuals, it aimed to create a safe, interactive space where participants could reflect on their emotions, understand stress, and build self-awareness, resilience, healthy coping and the confidence to seek support when needed.

2. Significance of Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing (MHEW)

The World Health Organization (WHO) describes mental health as a state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral part of health and wellbeing, not an optional extra. Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing (MHEW) is therefore the everyday ability to understand one's feelings, handle pressure, stay connected to others and keep going when life becomes hard, and it matters as much to a person who is well as to one who is struggling.

The scale of the issue is large. WHO's World Mental Health Report (2022) estimated that around one in eight people in the world, roughly 970 million, were living with a mental disorder in 2019. For women the pressures are often compounded by caring and household duties, family expectations, economic dependence and limited space to speak openly. Silence, stigma and the belief that "everyone has problems" mean that stress is often carried alone until it affects health, relationships and work.

Why MHEW matters for women at work and in learning spaces

- **It protects health:** prolonged stress shows up in sleep, eyesight, pain, fatigue and mood, as participants themselves noted.
- **It supports learning and productivity:** a person who feels calm and safe can concentrate, study and work better.
- **It strengthens families and communities:** women's wellbeing shapes the wellbeing of children and households.
- **It builds resilience:** simple habits such as pausing, breathing, reflecting and speaking up can be learned by anyone.
- **It reduces stigma:** when mental health is discussed openly, asking for help becomes normal rather than shameful.

MHEW and the work of HRDN

HRDN's Wellbeing Initiative, which includes its Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing (MHEW) work, brings these ideas into everyday spaces. The initiative rests on three simple ideas:

Pillar	In practice
Awareness	Helping people recognize stress, emotions and warning signs in themselves and others.
Skills	Teaching practical tools such as breathing, reframing negative thoughts, reflection and self-care routines.
Support	Creating safe spaces and linking people to help, so that reaching out is seen as strength.

3. The Partner Organizations

Human Resource Development Network (HRDN) is a membership-based network bringing together national and international organizations, professionals and institutions working in the development sector. HRDN is dedicated to capacity building, women's empowerment and community development.

Ministry of Human Rights (MOHR), Government of Pakistan, is the federal ministry responsible for promoting and protecting human rights in Pakistan. Its mandate includes strengthening institutional mechanisms, promoting human rights awareness, supporting policy and legislative measures, and coordinating efforts related to the protection of human rights.

The Women Welfare & Development Center (WWDC), Islamabad, hosted the session and brought together its women staff, teachers and students for a conversation on mental health, emotional well-being and stress management.

4. Proceedings of the Session

4.1 Welcome note by the CEO, HRDN

The session began with the recitation of the Holy Quran. Ms. Robeela Bangash, CEO of HRDN, then welcomed the participants and thanked the Ministry of Human Rights and the Women Welfare & Development Center for making the day possible. She also thanked the Center's staff, teachers and students for joining. Her welcome note spoke first of why the subject matters, and then of what HRDN is doing about it.

Why this field matters

Ms. Bangash reminded the room that mental health and emotional wellbeing are the foundation on which everything else rests: our work, our learning, our families and our relationships. Yet in many workplaces and homes they are still treated as private matters, spoken about late, if at all. This is especially true for women, who often carry a double load of professional and household responsibility and have little space to say that they are tired, worried or overwhelmed. Stress left unspoken does not go away; it settles into sleep, health, mood and performance. Naming it, understanding it and learning simple ways to manage it is not a luxury. It is a basic part of caring for oneself and for those who depend on us.

What HRDN is doing about it

HRDN's Wellbeing Initiative takes this conversation to the places where people spend most of their days: workplaces, training centres and learning spaces. Its approach is simple and practical. It builds **awareness** of stress and emotions, shares **skills** that anyone can use, and works towards **support** that is easy to reach, so that asking for help is seen as strength rather than weakness. Ms. Bangash noted that this session was the first activity under the collaboration between HRDN and MOHR, and that HRDN hoped it would be the beginning of a continuing series rather than a single event.

She then introduced the resource person, Dr. Naima Hassan, and invited participants to take part openly: to draw, to write, to move, to ask questions, and to leave with at least one practice they could use the very next day.

Resource person: Dr. Naima Hassan

Dr. Naima Hassan is a mental health and psychosocial support specialist with more than 30 years of experience across the United Nations, academia and civil society, and a former UN Staff Stress Counsellor. She brings deep expertise in workplace burnout, emotional regulation and psychological resilience in high-pressure environments.

Rather than treating well-being as theory, Dr. Hassan used a participatory approach, combining presentations, reflective exercises, breathing and movement, and self-awareness tools, so that stress management becomes a set of practical daily habits.

Dr. Hassan opened by stressing that looking after one's mental and emotional state is just as important as looking after one's physical appearance and health, and invited participants to become more aware of their own emotions, thoughts and responses to different situations.



Welcome. *The facilitators and hosts at the head table as the session opens, under the HRDN banners.*

4.2 Orientation: mental health and wellbeing at the workplace

Before the exercises, Dr. Naima gave an orientation presentation titled “Mental Health & Wellbeing at Workplace”, opened under the line “It is the time to prioritise MH&WB in the workplace”. It gave everyone a shared vocabulary and a simple map of the subject. The main points are narrated below.

Mental health is a continuum

The presentation began with a simple question: do we all have mental health? The answer is yes. Mental health is not static and is not simply “good” or “bad”. It sits on a continuum and changes over time with experience, ranging from an optimal state of wellbeing, through coping with the challenges of daily life, to severe emotional pain, distress and mental illness. Mental wellbeing describes how a person is feeling and how well she can cope with day-to-day challenges.

The WHO definition shared with participants

“A state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”

Mental health is an integral part of overall health and wellbeing and is a basic human right. Good mental health means we are better able to connect, function, cope and thrive, which is why it deserves as much care as physical health.

Mental health problems can affect anyone

Mental health problems can affect any of us, irrespective of age, personality or background. They cover a wide range of experiences and can change the way people think, feel or behave. They may arise from experiences in personal or working life, or without any easily identifiable cause, and may be mild or moderate for some and severe for others. The presentation named stress and anxiety-related problems, behavioral problems, substance abuse and psychotic problems as examples.

What good mental wellbeing looks like

A person with good mental wellbeing is able to recognize the good in herself and feel happy about her achievements; feel and express a range of emotions; face and accept challenges; cope with the stresses of daily life and manage times of change and uncertainty; feel engaged with the world around her; and live and work productively.

Stigma and taboo

Despite many efforts, discrimination, harmful stereotypes and stigma around mental health remain present across cultures and countries. People with mental health conditions can experience stigma from families, neighbors, colleagues and even health professionals, and some absorb these negative messages and begin to judge themselves, which is known as self-stigma. This is one reason many women stay silent about how they feel.

Don'ts when emotions are overwhelming

- Don't label yourself weak, "emotional" or "crazy".
- Avoid people you find draining and depressing.
- Do not make decisions in an emotional state.
- Don't start or increase alcohol, smoking or self-medication, and avoid too much caffeine and other stimulants.
- Don't try to "just forget", or act as if everything is fine. It is okay not to be okay.
- Don't watch sad, depressing or violent films or shows.

Wellbeing at the workplace

The presentation then moved to the workplace. Wellbeing at work means an environment where people feel psychologically safe and emotionally supported, perform effectively and keep a healthy balance between work and life. Caring for mental health benefits both employees and organisations: it improves productivity, job satisfaction and morale, lowers absenteeism and staff turnover, strengthens teamwork and communication, and reduces stress, burnout, anxiety and depression.

A mentally healthy workplace

- Respect and inclusion
- Diversity and equity
- Transparent communication
- Trust between leadership and employees
- Employee participation in decision-making
- Opportunities for professional development

Signs of poor wellbeing at work

- Reduced productivity and concentration
- Frequent absenteeism
- Irritability, mood changes and emotional outbursts
- Fatigue and low motivation
- Social withdrawal
- Higher error rates and accidents
- Headaches and sleep disturbances

Common workplace challenges

- Excessive workload and unrealistic deadlines
- Long hours and poor work-life balance
- Job insecurity
- Bullying, harassment or discrimination
- Lack of recognition and career growth
- Poor leadership and communication
- Role ambiguity and conflicting expectations
- Limited social support

What organisations can do

- Build a psychologically safe culture
- Offer awareness and resilience training, and hold a five-minute MH&WB discussion in each meeting
- Encourage open communication without stigma
- Train managers to spot and respond to concerns
- Allow flexible work and a fair workload
- Recognise and reward contributions
- Adopt anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies
- Offer counselling or employee assistance programmes

What each of us can do

- Set clear work-life boundaries and realistic goals
- Take regular micro-breaks, such as three minutes of stretching every hour
- Ask for support clearly when needed
- Practise mindfulness and relaxation
- Use deep breathing in moments of anger, frustration or sadness
- Recognise achievements, even small ones
- Look after sleep, nutrition, hydration and exercise
- Build supportive relationships and keep hobbies outside work

If you cannot manage

- Know your own limits
- To be overwhelmed is not a failure
- Take a time-out or a break
- Acknowledge and be honest with yourself
- Talk to a stress or staff counsellor, without fear
- Accept, identify, address, learn

The participants were engaged in two Reflection Exercises to go through in pairs and alone as below:

TRY IT YOURSELF**EXERCISE 1 | IN PAIRS****The six-question pair exercise**

Take turns asking each other:

1. One thing you **enjoy most** about work and the workplace
2. How you **appreciate colleagues**
3. The colleague you appreciate most, **and why**
4. A **personal strength** this week
5. A **small daily habit** that lasts and supports your wellbeing
6. Your **stress rating**, from 1 to 10

EXERCISE 2 | ALONE**The self-check: "Your current MH&WB issues"**

List what is weighing on you, under four headings:

1. **Personal**
2. **Family-related**
3. **Work and workplace**
4. **Social**

Self-awareness is the key

The orientation closed on self-awareness as the key to mental health and wellbeing: being mindful of one's thoughts and emotions, reflecting on how events are affecting us, caring for mental health as much as physical health, and asking for support before waiting too long.

A person can live a meaningful life with a health condition or a mental illness, provided she has proper treatment and support.

Key message and closing thought

A healthy workplace is not only one that protects physical safety but also one that actively supports the mental and emotional wellbeing of every employee.

"Healing begins when you accept yourself as you are."

4.3 Understanding stress

The facilitator then turned from wellbeing in general to stress, in a presentation titled "Stress & Coping Mechanism". It opened with the line "Nothing is more important than your wellbeing" and carried a refrain on every slide: **"We are here for you so that you can be there for them."**

The goal of stress management

The presentation set out its purpose plainly: to contribute to building a healthy environment at the workplace and to support work-life balance.

A safe and respectful space

Before turning to content, the facilitator set out the ethics of counselling practice that guided the session. These are availability, unconditional positive regard, a non-judgmental attitude, equality (no rank or grade, everyone is equal), no operational investigation or critique, no notes, and confidentiality. They told participants that what they shared would be received with respect.

Clearing the myths

The first task was to break two myths. The first is that stress means something is wrong with you. In fact, **stress is normal for every normal person; it is only the situation that is not normal.** The second is that stress is always bad. **Stress is not only negative: it can be positive too.** A slide of anxious-looking eggs illustrated the idea that everyone feels strain at times.

What stress is

Her working definition was simple: stress is a state of physical and psychological reaction, the body's response to a threat, a challenge or a change in the environment, and whatever triggers it is called a **stressor**.



Naming the problem. Participants follow the definition of stress on the screen: the body's response to a threat, a challenge or a change, which is called a stressor.

Dr. Naima encouraged participants to become more attentive to the signals their bodies and minds give them. She illustrated this through the example of looking in a mirror: people often focus on their clothes, hair and physical appearance, while overlooking what their eyes may be expressing or what their skin and body may be communicating.

A slide on the psychological, cognitive effects of stress made an important point. When a person is stressed, the body's energy is directed to more basic survival needs, so thinking tends to become inefficient and disorganised, with slowed thinking, difficulty in making decisions and solving problems, and a lack of creativity. For women who carry many responsibilities at home and at work, this explains why feeling "stuck" under pressure is a normal response and not a personal failing. A further slide on stress management linked managing stress with a healthy workplace environment and with work-life balance.

4.4 Where stress comes from

The presentation then looked at what sets stress off. It began with the stressors of the present moment, such as risk to health and life (physical security) for staff and their dependents, and went on to the everyday pressures that women at work and at home know well.

Current and everyday stressors

- Risk to health and life (physical security) for staff and dependents
- Lifestyle, health and wellbeing
- Conflicts, frustrations and fights
- Family and children issues
- Increased domestic responsibilities, family pressures and expectations
- Domestic abuse (emotional, physical, sexual)

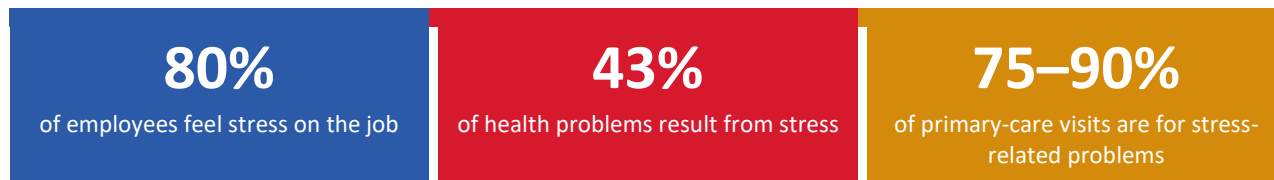
Factors that shape how stress is felt

- Personality type
- Past experience (traumas, exposure to critical incidents)
- Social support network
- Ambitions

All of these factors may have contributed to a situation being perceived as stressful. This is why **the same event is felt differently by different people, and even by the same person at different times**. The presentation asked participants to keep this in mind, because it explains why no one's reaction should be judged against another's.

Do you know...?

To show why this matters, the presentation shared figures that it attributed to the American Institute of Stress, and linked stress to leading causes of death, including cardiac disease, cancer, lung and liver disease, ulcers, allergies, accidents and suicide.



4.5 When stress becomes a problem

Stress turns into a problem, which the presentation called **distress**, depending on three things: how **often** it occurs (frequency), how **long** it lasts (duration) and how **strong** it is (intensity). The presentation explained this through the General Adaptation Syndrome (GAS), which describes how the body moves through three phases when a stressor continues.

Phase	What happens	What it looks like
1. Alarm	A threatening or dangerous event triggers the fight-or-flight response, and physiological changes occur.	A physical response such as running, fighting or verbal aggression, which dissipates stress, fear or anger.
2. Adaptation	The stress continues but there is no obvious physical response. Physiological, psychological and spiritual resources sustain the person.	Stress builds up quietly. Coping in this way is not a solution.
3. Exhaustion	Everyday stressors add to the original stressors and cumulative stress develops.	A breakdown can follow. This is a sign of burnout.

4.6 Three types of stress

Type	What it is	Examples
Basic stress	Anything that creates a hurdle for a short time and leaves no lasting impact on health and wellbeing.	Living in a new environment, starting a new job, learning new information, traffic issues, gadgets not working.
Cumulative stress	A small build-up of everyday life problems over time, mostly left unattended. It may lead to many physical and psychological ailments.	Daily household load, constant deadlines and unresolved tension that add up.

Type	What it is	Examples
Critical incident / traumatic stress	A normal response to an abnormal event, outside the range of normal human experience, usually sudden and life-threatening. Reactions may be immediate or delayed.	Witnessing casualties or destruction, or the serious injury or death of a relative, friend or co-worker.

4.7 How stress shows up

After a certain amount of time, a person who has been experiencing long-term or cumulative stressors may begin to show signs of collapsing. The signs were grouped into four areas. Exposure to stressful situations affects the human body, and symptoms can range from a mild headache to serious illness such as a heart attack or stroke because, “every stress leaves a deep scar”.

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional	Behavior and relationships
• Rapid heartbeat and breathing • Increased blood pressure • Headaches, muscle stiffness • Sleep disturbances, fatigue • Upset stomach, nausea, diarrhoea • Tremors, sweating, chills • Uncoordinated movements • Chest pain (should be checked at hospital)	• Slowed thinking • Difficulty making decisions and solving problems • Lack of creativity • Poor concentration and attention • Memory problems • Confusion and disorientation • Seeing the event over and over, distressing dreams • Decreased motivation; the “I’ll do it tomorrow” syndrome	• Anxiety and fear • Anger and irritability • Feeling numb, shock • Grief, feeling lost or abandoned • Guilt • Worry about others • Wanting to hide or limit contact • Neglect of self • Depression and sadness	• Changes in eating; eating disorders • Apathy, lacking emotion • Arguments and verbal outbursts • Isolation and withdrawal • Disrespect, doubting or criticising others • Abusive or violent behaviour • Substance abuse, more smoking, heavy drinking • Decline in personal hygiene

A reminder

Chest pain, in particular, should always be checked at a hospital. Any of these signs lasting for weeks is a signal to pause and seek support.

4.8 Coping: what helps and what harms

Each person handles stress differently. The presentation set two kinds of coping side by side. Its test was simple: **the defining feature of maladaptive coping is that it results in more problems for the person.**

Maladaptive coping (harms) • Self-medication • More alcohol, smoking or drugs • Unhealthy food • Excessive behaviors and anger • Not sharing what you feel	Adaptive coping (helps) • Cognitive techniques: creativity, keeping a diary • Support groups: family and friends, mindful greetings and mindful socializing • Healthy lifestyle: a mindful day, mindful eating, mindful behavior • Relaxation techniques: exercises
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Is stress always a bad thing?

No. Stress is a survival mechanism. It helps a person concentrate full attention on signs and symptoms, mobilize maximum physical energy and prepare for action in order to respond to a threat. The presentation invited participants to read further on **eustress** (helpful stress) and **distress** (harmful stress), and to notice which of the two they are experiencing.

4.9 Managing stress: what we can do

The last part of the presentation turned to practical steps. It began from a set of basic principles: the reaction to stress varies from person to person, and depends on the intensity, duration and frequency of the stressor, the situation, and social, spiritual and intellectual acceptances and taboos. Our own interpretation of events can raise our stress, and we can lower it by doing what we know is good for us, which the presentation called “fundamental stress management”.

Where to start

- Identify the stressors and address them. Most of the time we deal with stress by coping with it.
- Re-analyse or re-interpret a stressful event.
- Reduce acute reactions through relaxation techniques and exercise.
- Make changes in life that increase capacity, strengthen resistance and decrease stress. Attending a workshop and working on work-life balance are examples.

Healthy coping strategies

Seeking advice and help; analysing a problem and its possible solutions in a systematic way; ventilation and catharsis (letting feelings out); mindful exercises such as yoga and meditation; light exercise and sports; hobbies and activities; a balanced diet; and your belief system.

Things you can do today

Begin to monitor yourself and your temper	Schedule regular breaks
Try slow speaking	Eat regular meals and drink plenty of water
Seek out healthy outlets for frustration	Monitor your posture
Prioritise your work or problems	Develop a calming sequence for the end of the day
Practise deep breathing whenever you are stressed, and then react if needed	

Factors that help in the long term

- Relaxation exercises and meditation.
- Realistic expectations of yourself and others.
- Letting your mood follow your realistic thoughts, not the other way round.
- Providing support and help to other people.
- Socializing, sharing and using humor.

Helping colleagues under stress

- Be available for colleagues in your office.
- Listen sympathetically and offer sincere advice.
- Do not take anger personally.
- Avoid criticism unless necessary.
- Encourage and appreciate others.
- Engage in activities that build mutual trust, including virtually.

Seek assistance

Discuss ideas, reactions and feelings. Recognise the signs of critical incident stress. Maintain a positive attitude and stay focused. Stay in contact with others by talking. Look after yourself. **Ask for professional assistance and remember that stress is normal.**

The summary kit

Stress is normal and natural. It can affect all aspects of your life.

Stress can be prevented, handled or minimised.

There is no harm in asking for help.

Stress management is a skill that can be acquired and polished.

4.10 Exercise 1: Five circles, five colours

Each participant received a page with five concentric circles and was asked to fill them with five colours of her own choosing, giving each colour a meaning from her own life. There were no right answers, and the point was exactly that: the same blue can mean calm to one woman and distance to another. The exercise helped participants name feelings such as comfort, hope or peace that they rarely put into words.



Colouring in, side by side. Participants, teachers and staff fill their five circles at the same tables.

4.11 Exercise 2: Stretching and breathing

The group then stood or sat tall for a short movement break led by the facilitators. The sequence drew on simple seated stretches and yoga-style postures that can be done at a desk or at home in under five minutes. Participants were asked to move gently, within their comfort, and to stop if anything hurt.



Stretch and release. Participants raise their arms overhead, palms together, while the facilitators demonstrate shoulders and arm stretches for the group to follow.

Exercise	How it is done	Why it helps
Overhead stretch	Sit tall, press the palms together or interlock the fingers, and raise the arms overhead. Breathe in as the arms rise and breathe out as they lower slowly.	Releases the shoulders, neck and upper back, where worry and long sitting collect.
Hands clasped behind the back	Sit forward, clasp the hands behind the back, draw the shoulder blades together and lift the chest. Hold for three slow breaths, then release.	Opens a chest that tightens under stress and corrects a hunched posture.
Shoulder hug	Cross the arms over the chest with each hand on the opposite shoulder. Give a gentle squeeze and hold for three slow breaths.	Gives a calming, self-soothing pressure and eases tight shoulders.
Neck and shoulder release	Drop the right ear towards the right shoulder for three breaths, change sides, then roll the shoulders back five times.	Eases the neck tension that comes with stress and screen or desk work.
Slow belly breathing	Place a hand on the belly. Breathe in through the nose for a count of four and out slowly for a count of six. Repeat five times.	Slows the heart rate and tells the body it is safe to calm down.

Dr. Naima reminded participants that these practices take only a minute or two and can be used at home, at work or in a classroom, at moments of stress or emotional exhaustion. She also encouraged them to observe their own thoughts, notice negative patterns and replace them, step by step, with more constructive ways of thinking.

4.12 Exercise 3: Looking back over six months

A reflective activity asked participants to consider the previous six months, the difficult and the positive, and to record these on paper. It offered an opportunity to pause and recognise experiences that may otherwise go unacknowledged in the rush of everyday life. Participants listed what had put their health, peace of mind or daily life at risk, and some chose to write a page of reflection instead.



Taking a pause. Participants listen and reflect during the six-month exercise.

4.13 Moving on

A significant part of the session focused on the idea of “moving on”: accepting experiences, processing emotions and gradually moving forward rather than staying overwhelmed by past difficulties.

Organise your life like a cupboard

Dr. Naima encouraged participants to organize their lives in much the same way that they organise their cupboards: identify what is useful, what needs to be addressed and what may need to be let go.

4.14 Self-care and speaking up

The session closed with self-care, physical activity and speaking up for oneself in an appropriate and constructive way. Participants were reminded that exercise, rest and personal reflection are not a luxury but a part of maintaining well-being, and that seeking support when needed is not a weakness. Reaching out to others is an important and healthy part of coping with difficult circumstances.

4.15 Vote of thanks

The session closed with a vote of thanks by **Ms. Robeela Bangash, CEO of HRDN**, and **Ms. Shabana Nawaz, Director Social Welfare**.

Ms. Robeela Bangash, CEO, HRDN

Ms. Bangash thanked Dr. Naima Hassan for a warm, practical and participatory session that turned a difficult subject into something every woman in the room could relate to and use. She thanked the Ministry of Human Rights for its partnership in this first activity of the collaboration, and the Women Welfare & Development Center for hosting the session and bringing its staff, teachers and students together. She also thanked the participants for their openness, especially those who shared their drawings and reflections, and the HRDN team for organizing the day. She encouraged everyone to carry the simple practices of the session (pausing,

breathing, reflecting and speaking up) back into their homes and workplaces, and said that HRDN hopes to continue the series.

Ms. Shabana Nawaz, Director Social Welfare

Speaking as Director Social Welfare, Ms. Nawaz expressed her sincere appreciation to HRDN for organising such a timely and meaningful session. She commended Ms. Robeela Bangash for her leadership and vision, and for HRDN's commitment to taking important but often overlooked subjects directly to the women who need them. She also welcomed the collaboration between HRDN and the Ministry of Human Rights, noting that partnerships of this kind strengthen the welfare and development of women.

Ms. Nawaz paid special tribute to Dr. Naima Hassan for her warmth, experience and the practical, participatory way in which she handled a sensitive subject. She said that the exercises in drawing, reflection, breathing and movement had helped participants speak about their feelings with ease and confidence. She also appreciated the staff and teachers of the Women Welfare & Development Center for their commitment and for the arrangements that made the session a success.

Ms. Nawaz noted that the emotional wellbeing of women is central to the welfare of families and communities, and called for such conversations to become a regular part of the Center's work. She encouraged participants to look after themselves as seriously as they look after others, and to reach out for support whenever they need it, reminding them that seeking help is a sign of strength.

5. What the Participants' Work Revealed

The colour-circle and six-month exercises left behind pages of drawing and writing, and sixteen of these were reviewed for this report. They are not clinical data, and no conclusions are drawn about any individual. Read together, however, they give an honest picture of what the women who attended carry in their minds and of the resources they draw on to cope. Names have been removed from every page.

5.1 What color means to us

Although each participant chose different colours and different meanings, the meanings clustered around nature, water and sky, light and hope, shelter, faith and family love.



What the circles said. *The completed pages laid out after the exercise. No two are alike, yet nature, light and love recur on almost everyone.*

	Green	Nature, peace, feeling relaxed, independence, and the national flag.
	Blue	The sea and the sky: calmness, peace and something "unlimited".
	Yellow	The rising sun, light, joy and hope.
	Red	Purity, and for some the strongest, warmest feeling in the circle.
	Brown	Earth, woods and shelter; also named a favourite colour.
	Orange	Mental peace and the colour of painting and creativity.

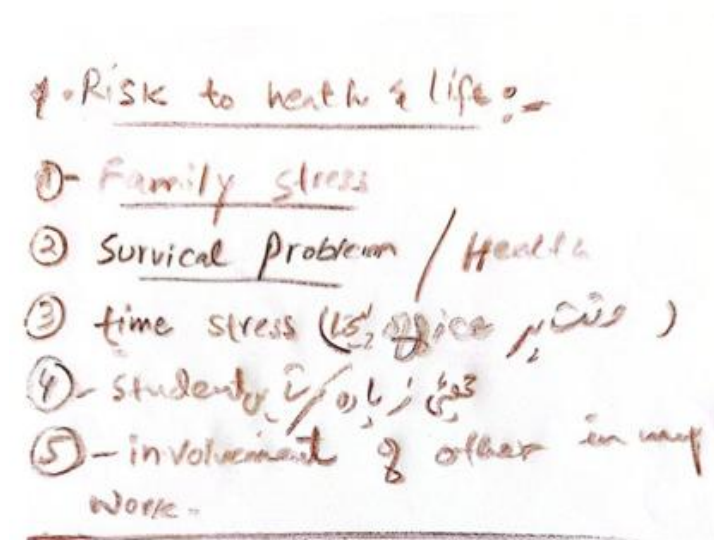
Pink	Love and favourite things, including the participant's daughters.
Purple	The luxuries and blessings given by God; the need for "a different colour" in life.
White	Purity.

What the colours tell us

- **Nature, sky and sea** appear again and again as sources of calm. For many women these are the first things that come to mind when asked what gives them peace.
- **Light, sun and yellow** are linked with hope. One participant wrote that yellow is "for sun rising and hope of light".
- **Faith** runs through the drawings. One participant drew her whole life as a journey from soil to sky and to heaven, ending: "start life, then back to Allah".
- **Relationships** are a source of strength. Pink and warm colours stood for family and, in one case, for "my lovely daughters".
- One drawing named its five circles **peace of mind, love, hope, self-care and helping others**, which could stand as a summary of the whole session.

5.2 What weighs on our minds

In the six-month reflection, participants listed what had put their health, peace of mind or daily life at risk. The lists were short, plain and very consistent.



In their own words. Two participants' lists of stressors: family stress, health, time stress, studies and extra work on the left; home responsibility, eyesight, walking, disappointment, career and foot pain on the right.

Theme	What participants wrote
Family and household responsibility	Family stress, home responsibilities, difficulty managing the household and children, and living in a joint family with many demands.
Health	Survival and health problems, eyesight, difficulty walking and foot pain.

Theme	What participants wrote
Time and workload	Time stress, studying while working, and being involved in many other tasks at once.
Study and career	Pressure of studies and worry about career and the future.
Feelings and relationships	Feeling disappointed, thinking about friends, tension, low confidence and, in places, low mood.

5.3 Patience, resilience and aspiration

Several participants chose to write a page of reflection rather than a list. Translated from Roman Urdu and Urdu, and with identifying details removed, these notes are among the most powerful material from the session.

In the participants' words :

"I have many problems in my life, but, Alhamdulillah, I thank Allah and live with patience."

"I live in a joint family and have had to face a great deal. Even so, I have come here and ignored the difficulties."

"I want to stand on my own feet and support my family, but I have no confidence and no skills yet."

"Orange gives me mental peace. Blue is for peace."

Insight for HRDN and MOHR

The participants did not ask for complicated solutions. Their drawings point to simple needs: time for themselves, ways to calm down, someone to talk to, practical skills and confidence, and recognition that their worries are real. These are exactly the kinds of needs that a continuing MHEW series can meet.

6. Key Learning Points

The session gave participants several practical and reflective takeaways.

Learning point	What it means
Mental health is a continuum	Everyone has mental health, and it changes over time; it is not simply good or bad.
Wellbeing at work is a shared task	Healthy workplaces and individual habits work together: psychological safety, fair workload, breaks, boundaries and support.
Stress is normal, and not always bad	Stress is a survival response that is normal for every person. It becomes a problem when it is frequent, long-lasting or intense.
Stress affects thinking and the body	Under stress, thinking slows and decisions feel harder; recognising this helps people be kinder to themselves.
Know the types and the phases	Basic, cumulative and critical incident stress call for different responses, and unattended stress can move from alarm to adaptation to exhaustion.
Pause and check in with yourself	Taking a moment to understand one's emotional and physical state can prevent stress from becoming overwhelming.
Understand your emotions	Emotional awareness is an important first step towards managing emotions effectively.
Pay attention to internal signals	Mental and physical well-being can be reflected through changes in thoughts, behaviour and bodily responses.
Choose adaptive coping	Healthy habits help; self-medication, smoking, alcohol, anger and silence create more problems than they solve.
Challenge negative thoughts	Recognising negative thought patterns and consciously reframing them can support a healthier mindset.
Use practical coping techniques	Stretching, breathing, reflection and short breaks can help manage everyday stress.
Learn to move forward	Processing difficult experiences and learning to let go can support emotional resilience.
Speak up for yourself	Communicating needs and concerns appropriately is an important part of personal well-being.
Support each other	Listening, encouraging and being available to a colleague under stress is part of a healthy workplace.
Asking for help is acceptable	Seeking support should be viewed as a healthy coping mechanism rather than a sign of weakness.
Make time for yourself	Personal well-being requires intentional time for rest, reflection and self-care.

7. Participant Reflections and Observations

The interactive design of the session encouraged active participation and personal reflection. Rather than listening to a lecture, participants expressed themselves through drawing, writing, movement, breathing and open discussion. The colour exercise showed how individual experience shapes emotion and perception, and the six-month reflection helped participants recognise both the challenges they had faced and the positive moments they may have overlooked.



Together. Women staff, teachers and students taking part in the session.

A meaningful moment

One particularly meaningful moment involved a woman who works as a household helper for one of the instructors at the Center. Having never attended school, she had never had the opportunity to take part in classroom-based activities. During the session, she held a pencil and drew for the first time. Despite this being a completely new experience for her, she completed the activity well.

Her participation highlighted the value of creating inclusive spaces where every individual is encouraged to express themselves, regardless of educational background.

The engagement of participants reflected the relevance of the topic to their everyday lives. The combination of practical exercises and open reflection made mental health more approachable and helped participants connect the discussion with their own experiences. It also reinforced an important message: emotional well-being is not only about addressing difficulties after they arise; it also means building everyday habits of self-awareness, self-care, healthy communication and resilience.

8. Way Forward

Building on what participants shared, the following next steps are suggested for discussion between HRDN, MOHR and the Center:

- Start every team meeting at the Center with a **five-minute conversation** on mental health and wellbeing, as the orientation presentation suggested.
- Continue the MHEW series with **short, regular sessions** for women staff, teachers and students, so that practices such as breathing and stretching become habits.
- Introduce a **simple, confidential way** for participants to ask for support, with a trained person or referral contact available at the Center.
- Add **practical, skills-based sessions** on confidence, communication and income-generating skills for women who expressed a wish to stand on their own feet.
- Include **family-stress and time-management** topics, which featured most strongly in the participants' own lists.
- Train a few staff members and teachers as **peer wellbeing volunteers** who can follow up between sessions, drawing on the presentation's guidance on helping colleagues under stress.

9. Conclusion

The “Wellbeing & Stress Management in Today's World” session was a meaningful first activity under the collaboration between HRDN and the Ministry of Human Rights. By focusing on emotional well-being, stress and practical coping, it addressed an important but under-discussed dimension of personal and professional development.

It showed the value of taking wellbeing conversations directly into workplaces and learning environments. Through a clear orientation, honest reflection, creative expression and simple movement, participants were encouraged to take a pause, understand themselves, feel better and move forward. Most importantly, the session created a space where women could recognise their own emotional needs, appreciate the importance of self-care and understand that seeking support is a positive step towards a healthier and more balanced life.

Annexure: Attendance Sheet

The attendance sheet is reproduced to record that the session took place and that 26 participants signed in. Under MOHR policy and HRDN's data-protection practice, participants' names, contact numbers, ID numbers and signatures are not published and have been withheld.



حاضری شیٹ

ذہنی اور جذباتی تناؤ اور اس سے نمٹنے کے طریقے

خصوصی تربیتی نشست برائے خواتین

تاریخ: بدھ، 19 اگست 2026 (مقام: وزارت انسانی حقوق کامرکز، G-7/4، اسلام آباد)



I give my consent to use of my pictures & video on HRDN's social media platform

نمبر شمار	نام شرکاء	والد / شوہر کا نام	شناختی کارڈ نمبر	رابطہ نمبر	تعلیم	گاؤں / شہر	دستخط / نشان / گھونٹا
1.							
2.							
3.							
4.							
5.							

Participant names, contact and ID numbers, and signatures are withheld in line with MOHR policy. 26 participants signed in.

Photo Gallery



Together at the close. Participants, the resource person and the HRDN and WWDC team with the #HRDN sign at the end of the session..

Acknowledgements

- **The Ministry of Human Rights**, for its partnership and support in this first activity of the collaboration.
- **The Women Welfare & Development Center (WWDC), Islamabad**, for hosting the session and for the participation of its staff and teachers.
- **Dr. Naima Hassan**, resource person, for a warm, practical and participatory session.
- **The 26 participants**, including students, women staff and teachers, for their openness and active participation, and for sharing their own drawings and reflections.
- **Ms. Shabana Nawaz, Director Social Welfare**, for joining the closing of the session and the vote of thanks.
- **The HRDN team**, for organizing the session.