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Homemaker or Breadwinner

Labour Force Participation of Pakistani Women

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Research Summary

Why was the research done?

Pakistan has seen an increase in policy efforts to promote women's participation in the labour force over recent years. However, existing research demonstrates that these efforts have not translated into an increase in women's labour force participation. In this paper we use the ecological systems approach to examine multiple factors that influence Pakistani women's participation in the labour market and experiences of employment.

What were the key findings?

Drawing on in-depth interviews with 35 Pakistani women, we examine how societal attitudes such as notions of honour, primacy of marriage, and persistence of gender inequality at home hinders women's participation in the labour market. Our results show men's support in facilitating women to pursue employment and personal strategies adopted by women to overcome gender discrimination in the workplace are important factors associated with better labour market outcomes for women.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

In addition to policies that focus on equal opportunities for women in the labour market and ratifying international conventions, there is an important need for affirmative action to put these policies into practice and awareness programs that address traditional societal attitudes that disadvantage women in Pakistan.

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Introduction

Pakistan has shown a commitment to improving labour force participation rates of women by endorsing important international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1996 and the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Equal Remuneration Convention in 2001. This commitment has been reinforced in the Government of Pakistan's Labour Protection Policy (2006), which underscored the government's determination to eradicate gender bias in the labour force. This policy emphasises the government's resolve for providing women with equal opportunities for employment, equal wages, and establishing a conducive environment for women in workplaces (Ali & Syed, 2017). Similar commitments are seen in local labour laws that emphasise promoting equality for women through clauses such as provision for childcare services and separate rest room facilities for women in workplaces (Ali, 2013; Syed & Ali, 2019). Overall, at the policy level different governments in Pakistan have attempted to ensure that both men and women have equal opportunities to participate in the labour force.

Despite this strong policy commitment to equality of opportunity, persistent gender gaps exist in Pakistan's labour force. Indeed, women's labour force participation is significantly lower than that of men (20.73% and 78.08% respectively) (Zahidi, 2022). Even for "women in the highest education category, the employment rate is 62 percentage points lower than that of men" (Najeeb et al., 2020, p. 19). This raises important questions about why, even with these policy efforts, women in Pakistan are still not equally represented in the labour force.

This paper draws on the voices of 35 Pakistani women to examine the factors that facilitated or hindered their participation in the labour force. The analysis is guided by an ecological systems approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007), which foregrounds the importance of considering how individuals' behaviours and outcomes are strongly shaped by the cultural values and norms of the society in which they live. By adopting an ecological systems approach this paper aims to answer the following research question: How do cultural values and social norms intersect with broader social institutions to influence the labour force participation of Pakistani women? The findings highlight how key cultural values and norms around honour, marriage, and gender roles constrain women's choices to participate in the labour market. Importantly, we also identify key facilitators and personal strategies adopted by women that enabled them to pursue and maintain employment. The findings

foreground the important need for devising policies and awareness programs that can address traditional cultural values and norms that disadvantage Pakistani women in the labour force.

Cultural values, social norms, and the family institution

Societal expectations of women's responsibilities for domestic and care work have a significant influence on their participation in the labour market. Even though societies are becoming more accepting of women joining the labour force, women's participation in the labour force is still largely influenced by their responsibilities within their families (Tlaiss, 2014). Women's high level of responsibilities for domestic and care work make it difficult for them to balance family and work. This unequal division widens even further in more patriarchal societies where work-family roles and expectations are largely shaped by stereotypical gender attitudes due to the traditionally held belief of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers (Syed & Ali, 2019; Syed et al., 2018).

Within traditional societies, such as Pakistan, male members of the family play a significant role in women's decisions related to education, employment, and marriage (Agha, 2022). Decisions by male members regarding women are usually in accordance with existing cultural values and social norms, which has led to limited economic opportunities for women and moreover, links a family's honour to the behaviour of its female members (Agha, 2022; Moghadam, 2004). Within conservative societies, if women want to move away from the homemaker role and pursue employment, they require the support of the male members of their household, be it their father, brother, or husband. In instances where this support is lacking, women are confined to domesticity (Al Hasani, 2016; Naguib & Jamali, 2015).

Hochschild and Machung (2012) contend that every marriage bears resemblance to socio-cultural trends that exist outside of marriage. This point is particularly relevant when examining women's labour force participation in traditional societies such as Pakistan where marriage occupies a primary status in a woman's life. Given the primary status of marriage in women's lives, they are expected to prioritize their marriage, family, and domestic/caring responsibilities over their careers (Masood, 2019). Research shows the need for examining family related factors such as disproportionate domestic and caring responsibilities that influence women's employment decisions (Ali & Kramar, 2015). These family related factors are critical in examining work-family conflict in more traditional societies such as Pakistan where the responsibility of maintaining the home predominantly lies with the women and men are exonerated from such responsibilities (Agha, 2022; Bhatti & Jeffery, 2012; Bhatti, 2013).

Cultural values, social norms, and the workplace

Cultural values and social norms also influence the operations and culture of the workplace (Scott, 2014). Within workplaces gender discrimination is not only visible in the form of consequences like decreased workforce participation of women but also in processes like gender prejudice in promotion and advancement (Alimo-Metcalfe, 2010) and harassment issues (Ali & Kramar, 2015).

In many societies, leadership is considered a masculine domain due to the largely male-dominated culture of workplace institutions. Even when men and women have similar years of work experience men are more likely to get promoted over women (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Costa Dias et al., 2020). Gender ideology permeates workplace culture, whereby men are typically associated with agentic traits, such as assertiveness, dominance, competitiveness, and achievement orientation. Conversely, women are often linked to communal traits, such as helpfulness, kindness, sympathy, understanding, and compassion (Diekman & Eagly, 2008). These gendered perceptions have significant implications as they contribute to the underrepresentation of women in management positions and biased selection and promotion policies that favor men (Badura et al., 2018).

Gender discrimination is further intensified for Pakistani women in the workplace due to beliefs about honour and modesty. These beliefs not only influence women's access to the labour market but also strongly impact their experience of employment, and their behaviour and voice within the workplace (Ali, 2013). Although laws within workplaces exist to protect women (such as harassment laws), beliefs about female modesty and honour means that women who are subjected to discrimination and harassment often do not report these incidents for fear of damaging their reputation (Ali & Kramar, 2015). This silencing of women extends the definition of purdah from being just a cloth that covers a woman's body, to suppressing women's voices in incidences of harassment to protect their honour.

There is also strong evidence that work-family conflict that arises due to workplace arrangements has a significant impact on women's employment decisions (Kossek & Lee, 2017). Scholars have found that in many instances women's attempts to obtain flexible working hours and travel arrangements have been rebuffed by their workplace leading them to quit their careers (Kossek et al., 2017; Stone, 2007; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). For example, there exists evidence where highly educated and economically successful women gave up their careers to become full-time housewives to take care of their families, a

phenomenon known as the opt-out revolution (Belkin, 2003; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). Belkin (2003) coined the term opt-out revolution to describe the experiences of well qualified upper-middle-class women who decided that long working hours were detrimental to their children. Due to the lack of flexibility in workplaces to accommodate the needs of these women, they decided to give up their successful careers. Similar findings have been reported in other studies regarding women's decision to leave their jobs in favor of their domestic/caring responsibilities owing to workplace inflexibility (Kossek & Lee, 2017; Kossek et al., 2017; Stone & Hernandez, 2013).

The effect of inflexibility intensifies when combined with inadequate childcare services (Masood, 2019). Research demonstrates the importance of childcare services in enabling parents, especially mothers, to work (Kossek et al., 2017; Stone & Hernandez, 2013). Women in developing countries such as Pakistan are dependent on informal support (grandparents, sisters, maids) to maintain their employment due to inadequate childcare services. And where this informal support does not exist, women are forced to quit their employment (Premani et al., 2021; Tahir, 2016).

An ecological approach

As evidenced above, existing research clearly demonstrates that cultural values and social norms at the societal level interact deeply with the institutions of family and workplace, which in turn impact women's choices and experiences related to employment. The literature suggests that women's decisions and experiences related to employment are complex and understanding them requires an approach that can account for the interactions between different systems and how these influence women's choices and experiences of employment. An ecological approach is well-suited to achieving this, as it allows for the exploration of how cultural values and social norms interact with broader social institutions to influence individuals' behaviours and outcomes.

However, there are limited studies that adopt an ecological systems approach to examine the interaction between the individual and their environment, and how this shapes women's decisions and experiences regarding employment (Lau et al., 2021). It is for this reason that we utilize the ecological systems approach in this paper to gauge a comprehensive view of the diverse factors within a woman's environment that influences her employment choices and experience of employment. The central focus of the ecological systems approach resides in the individual and the impact that the interactions between the individual and various

systems within their contextual milieu exert on their development and decision-making processes.

Bronfenbrenner's theory outlines four key contextual levels: microsystems, which encompass the individual's immediate environments; mesosystems, which involve the interrelationships between these microsystems; exosystems, comprising institutions and social structures that indirectly impact the individual through the environments they inhabit; and macrosystems, representing the broader social and cultural norms that influence individuals. In our research we use the micro, meso, and macro systems from the ecological systems approach to investigate women's employment choices and experiences of employment.

By utilising the ecological systems approach our research contributes to existing literature by emphasizing the micro-macro linkages that take into consideration multiple factors at the societal, familial and workplace level and how they interact with one another in influencing women's employment experiences and decisions. In doing so, this research shows how these interactions collectively contribute towards understanding the power disparity and disadvantage that Pakistani women face within their social and employment contexts.

Methodology

This paper is a component of a larger project examining different contextual factors that impacts women's access to education, employment, and their experiences of empowerment in Pakistan. The project employed a mixed-methods approach combining surveys with in-depth interviews. The interview participants come from the larger sample (N= 1031) of survey respondents who expressed interest in participating in a follow up interview. Specific criteria encompassing educational backgrounds, employment status, geographical locations, age groups, and survey responses were employed to select interview participants to ensure diverse representation of women in the study.

Online interviews were conducted with 35 participants ranging in length from 25 to 120 minutes and covered topics related to women's education, employment, and experiences of empowerment in Pakistan. The participants profiles are provided in Table 1. The interviews predominantly took place in the Urdu language. It is noteworthy that all participants were proficient in English; however, they expressed a preference for conducting the interviews in Urdu. The participants relayed that their preference was due to their comfort in sharing their life experiences in their native language, which they believed would enable more authentic and

accurate narration. Following the recording, the interviews were translated and transcribed. The transcriptions were subsequently shared with the participants for verification, ensuring that the translation captured their experience and was true to their narratives. The names of the participants were replaced by pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. This research received institutional approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee [University of Queensland's Human research Ethics Committee, approval number 2020000090].

Table 1 Participant profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Highest Education	Work Status	Marital Status	Children
Suhaela	40–44	Masters	Employed	Married	2
Saba	40–44	Masters	Employed	Married	2
Farhana	35–39	Bachelors	Employed	Never married	0
Mehnaz	35–39	Masters	Employed	Married	2
Ansa	30–34	Masters	Employed	Divorced	0
Ruqqiya	35–39	Masters	Employed	Married	0
Jaweria	40–44	Masters	Employed	Married	2
Hania	50–54	Masters	Employed	Never married	0
Batool	30–34	Masters	Employed	Divorced	1
Sania	30–34	Masters	Employed	Married	0
Khalida	25–29	Masters	Employed	Never married	0
Mahrou	35–39	Masters	Employed	Never married	0
Raheema	40–44	Masters	Employed	Never married	0
Noor Jahan	35–39	Masters	Employed	Never married	0
Mahrukh	35–39	Masters	Employed	Divorced	0
Shahnaz	45–49	Bachelors	Employed	Married	2
Ghazala	30–34	Masters	Employed	Married	1
Bushra	35–39	Masters	Employed	Divorced	0
Maliha	35–39	Masters	Employed	Never married	0
Fatima	25–29	Masters	Employed	Never married	0
Taskeen	35–39	Masters	Employed	Never married	0
Sadia	40–44	Bachelors	Previously Employed	Divorced	0
Maqbool	30–34	Masters	Previously Employed	Married	2
Zara	45–49	Masters	Previously Employed	Married	5
Sana	40–44	Masters	Previously Employed	Married	4
Seemal	35–39	Masters	Previously Employed	Never married	0
Zulekah	30–34	Masters	Previously Employed	Married	2
Amira	35–39	Masters	Previously Employed	Married	3
Faria	30–34	Masters	Previously Employed	Never married	0
Saleema	40–44	Masters	Previously Employed	Married	2
Gul	40–44	Masters	Previously Employed	Married	2
Sonia	35–39	Masters	Previously Employed	Married	2
Shahzadi	25–29	Masters	Previously Employed	Married	1
Zeenia	30–34	Masters	Previously Employed	Married	2
Sehar	25–29	Masters	Previously Employed	Married	2

The data from the interviews was analysed through a deductive thematic approach. Our analysis focused on the interplay between macro (cultural values and societal norms) and micro systems (home and workplaces), as well as between micro-micro systems to comprehend the factors that shape Pakistani women's choices concerning labour market

participation and their corresponding employment experiences. The key themes identified for coding encompassed various important aspects, including notions of honor, the primacy of marriage, and the persistence of gender inequality in the domestic and workplace spheres. Additionally, the themes included the significance of men's support, and women's strategies of defying gender roles in the workplace. These themes provided a comprehensive framework for analysing and understanding the dynamics of gender, culture, and work within the context of our study.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of our research. First, the themes discussed in this paper are not exhaustive and may not capture all experiences, given the research design, sample size and the diversity that exists across provinces in Pakistan. The diversity referred to here encompasses various dimensions, such as religiosity, socio-economic status, family structures, employment patterns and educational trends that may influence the experiences and perspectives of individuals in different regions of the country. Second, this paper only captures the experiences of highly educated women and does not report the experience of women who are not highly qualified. Given the importance of education in enabling women to participate successfully in employment, it is likely that the findings reported here are experienced even more acutely for less educated Pakistani women who likely face greater hurdles in participating in the labour market. Third, this paper does not investigate the experiences of women who have never been employed. Therefore, more research is required to fully explain the diverse experiences of women's employment choices and experiences in Pakistan for effective policy making and implementation.

Findings

Domestic and caring responsibilities

The women provided important insights into the burden of domestic responsibilities influencing women's employment in Pakistan. The narratives highlight the difficulties women face in managing work and their families, given that women are expected to undertake the larger portions of domestic and caring responsibilities. Amira — who was a medical doctor and is married with three children found work life balance to be stressful in trying to manage housework, care for children and a full-time job. She shared:

> It gets really hard to maintain a full-time job when you have kids and have to manage the housework as well. Although I did have house help, I had to make sure that everything was done properly and on time. My job was already very stressful. Combine

> that with taking care of the kids, managing their activities, getting up during the night, having no support from the husband and doing a second shift after coming home. It just became impossible. So, I quit. I hate that I had to quit my job, but the alternative was staying angry, stressed, and exhausted 24/7.

Similar to Amira, Zulekah — who was an accountant by profession, is married and has one child — spoke about how domestic responsibilities became an extreme burden for her as she had no support from her husband and her in-laws. Zulekha explained:

> My marriage played a significant role in me leaving my job. Once married all the domestic responsibilities came on my shoulder. And I had no house help. I was expected to carry out all the chores at home with no help from my in-laws. I was made aware by my husband that there should be no compromise on domestic chores. Solely performing these tasks was extraneous. And after having my child, it became impossible to do double shifts of work.

Both Amira and Zulekha ended up quitting their employment due to the excessive burden of domestic responsibilities. However, Amira was able to remain in her employment for some time due to the support provided by paid help. At the same time, it is evident from Amira's example that paid help is not sufficient to sustain employment if other members within the family are not willing to share the domestic/caring responsibilities. Both Amira and Zulekha also mention stress suggesting that it is not just the hours of work required to juggle paid and unpaid work and care, but also the resulting stress that amplifies this double burden, especially if husbands and families are uncompromising about who must do the domestic and care work. Amira and Zulekha's narratives indicate how their employment choices are shaped by the family values and norms that reinforce cultural and societal expectations placing domestic and caring responsibilities at the center of women's lives in Pakistan.

The cultural primacy of marriage

The interview data also showed the cultural primacy of marriage which occupies a central status in a woman's life in Pakistan. The social position of marriage, and the taboo associated with divorce, mean that when women are forced to choose between a career and their marriage, women choose their marriage, even if they have spent many years building their career.

Sana — who is married, previously worked as a medical doctor, and has four children — shared that her in-laws and husband had promised her before marriage that she will be able to continue with her career after marriage. However, once married, both her in-laws and her

husband were discontented with her job. Sana said:

> At times when I would come home after a night shift, they would not open the door and would keep me waiting outside. When I would come home after the night shift my mother-in-law would not let me sleep during the day. She would tell me to complete all the domestic chores even though she had house help. They started complaining to my parents about me being incompetent in domestic chores and taking care of my husband. They said "we wanted a wife for our son who can look after him and the house. We do not care about her degree." The only way I could get out of this chaos and save my marriage was to quit my job. I preferred my marriage over my career because that is what we are taught in the Pakistani society.

Similar to Sana, Zara — who was a nutritionist by profession, is married, and has five children — expressed how the importance of marriage was instilled in her by her parents:

> The notion of primacy of marriage in a woman's life was ingrained in my mind since my teenage years by parents, especially my mother. I was always told that I should always behave and obey my husband, no matter what the circumstances. It is for this reason that when he threatened me with divorce when I wouldn't quit my career, I decided to end my career.

These findings suggest that even when opportunities are available for women in employment, culturally ascribed roles, and the primacy of marriage for women in Pakistan restrict these opportunities. The findings in the above two sections demonstrate that the double burden of paid and unpaid work is a significator factor influencing women's employment. This double burden is intensified given the primacy of marriage and domestic roles for women in Pakistan. This clearly indicates the need for a shift in cultural models that perpetuate traditional gender roles in the Pakistani society.

Intrinsic motivation and significance of family support

At the same time, our data showed examples where married women were able to challenge these traditional models. Three important factors enabled some women to persevere in their employment. These were first woman's intrinsic motivation for her employment, second a sense of self and confidence that was instilled in these women often by their fathers from an early age, and third, support from husbands which helped them in contesting the opposition that arose from their extended families when they started employment. We address each of these factors in turn.

Although women valued their roles a wives and mothers, some expressed a strong desire to remain in the labour market. For example, Ruqqiya — who works in a non-profit organisation, is married and does not have children—indicated that when she got married, she was constantly reminded by her husband and her mother-in-law that her career and education had little value compared to her husband's. She did have the option of giving up her career and staying home, but this was not her wish. Ruqqiya explained:

> I have never wanted myself to be limited to the role of a wife. That is an identity that I get through my husband. I wanted something more in my life, my own identity. That is what keeps me motivated when I get frustrated with everything that goes on at home. I have worked very hard to get to the position that I am in today, and I am not ready to give that up.

Ruqqiya went on to explain that it was her father who had instilled this sense of self in her that keeps her motivated and persistent, especially in instances where the double burden and sarcastic remarks of her in-laws become exhausting. She said:

> I always had the drive to achieve something more than the path society had laid out for me. That drive took its form through the inspiration and motivation that my father gave me. He taught me how to be persistent when he took a stand against my extended family when I went abroad to study and when I started working in an NGO. And it is the same persistence I practice today.

Similar to Ruqqiya, Saba and Suhaela — who are both working, married and have children — shared in their narratives the confidence and sense of self that was instilled in them by their fathers from an early age. They both stated that from an early age their fathers encouraged them to think critically about what was happening in their surroundings. Speaking on this topic Saba stated:

> My father motivated me to follow my aspirations. He took a strong stance against our family and community when I continued my studies after grade 10. His support continued when I decided to pursue a career. It was inconceivable in my family and community that a woman can leave the house and pursue employment. His constant support motivated me to keep going no matter what anyone was saying.

The interviews also showed the importance of husbands' support in breaking traditional norms and roles in the Pakistani society. For example, Shahnaz — who is married with two children,

an entrepreneur and the CEO of a tech company — elaborated on how the support she received from her husband helped her to resist the strong opposition that came from her in-laws when she started her employment. Shahnaz explained:

> A major reason that I have my organisation today is the support that I received from my husband. When I decided to work a strong opposition arose from my in-laws. In my in-law's women do not work. The women who are married into my in-law's family are expected to be housewives only. My husband, however, was a different man, an unconventional man. He told me to turn a deaf ear to all the criticism coming my way and pursue my career. Without his support I would not be where I am today.

Suhaela and Saba shared similar experiences where their husbands motivated them to keep going when they encountered difficulties within their careers. These women's accounts can be seen as contesting the boundaries of acceptable gender roles in the Pakistani society. Their ability to contest these traditional boundaries can be seen as originating not only from their own motivations and desires but also through the confidence and support they were receiving from their fathers or their husbands. These findings demonstrate how parents' progressive behaviour, motivation, and encouragement to break traditional boundaries along with spousal support, serve as important resources that build women's coping strategies to deal with challenges that come their way in patriarchal societies.

Values, norms, and the role of the workplace

Clash between domestic and work life

The participants provided important insights about the values and norms in their workplace which did not support women who had family responsibilities. Saleema —who was a development practitioner, is married and has two children— shared that the organisation she worked in had no flexibility in working hours, maternity leave, or access to childcare services. She had repeatedly requested flexibility in her working hours, but she was refused each time. She stated:

> I worked in that organisation for 22 years, but senior management's behaviour made me quit. No facility in terms of working hours, maternity leave, or childcare services. I asked for flexibility in my working hours because the housework after having children was very demanding, but they refused. Each time I went on maternity leave I had to start from square one again. It was as if I was being punished for being a mother.

> I was denied leadership positions three times because I was considered not suitable for the job because the management believed that I cannot take on such responsibilities because of my caring responsibilities. Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore and I quit.

Similarly, Ghazala —who is an aeronautical engineer, married, has one child, and is presently employed—elaborated on the shift in the attitude of her senior management once she got married and became a mother deeming her not suitable for higher positions due to her increased caring responsibilities. She shared that women in aviation are easy targets for desk jobs. She explained:

> Despite being the top preference, and having an outstanding profile, fulfilling the merit for the leadership position in my team, I was chopped down from the interview altogether when they got to know I am married and have a child. I was not even given a chance.

Both examples provide evidence of workplaces that are not compatible with managing paid and unpaid work, placing Pakistani women at a systematic disadvantage when it comes to employment. Despite Pakistan's increasing gender-equitable labour force policies, such as the Labour Protection Policy that aims to create more favourable work environments for female workers, flexibility in work hours and childcare services were not available to these participants.

The women in the study explained how they had to rely on informal childcare support from their families to continue their jobs. The women shared that they had spoken to their management about providing childcare services repeatedly but were unsuccessful. Mehnaz —who is a teacher by profession, is presently employed, and has two children— elaborated on how if it were not for her mother's support, she would not have been able to keep working. She explained:

> Even now when I have to work outside of regular hours my children stay with my mother. Without her support there is no way that I would be working. Many of my female colleagues have raised the issue of childcare services in the workplace but to no avail.

A similar narrative to that of Mehnaz was shared by Gul who is married, has two children, and was previously employed. She shared:

> I did not leave my job by choice. I was forced to leave. While working my sister came from the village and took care of my children. I put in multiple applications for having childcare services but to no avail. When my sister got married, I had no support. As a result, I had to quit.

A number of work-family scholars within developed and developing countries advocate the critical importance of workplace policies such as childcare availability, paid family leave, and flexibility in working hours to support working parents (Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Kaduk et al., 2019; Kelly et al., 2011; Mohsin & Syed, 2020). However, access to these kinds of services is very limited in Pakistan. It is also important to note that relying solely on employers as the primary providers of childcare services may prove inadequate and ineffective. Hence, a more comprehensive approach is necessary, involving the engagement of government institutions in the provision of childcare services. Such a strategy will help in establishing the fundamental importance of childcare services and emphasise the need for shared responsibility and support from relevant institutions, extending beyond individual employers.

Workplace norms and gender stereotypes

The interviews also revealed that in instances where women were able to gain access to leadership positions, they faced severe opposition from men within their organisations. For some participants the opposition went to such an extent that they ended up giving up their leadership position. For example, Mahrukh — who is presently employed in a non-profit organisation and is divorced— shared that in a previous job she was appointed as the CEO of the organisation. She was the first woman who had been given this role in the organisation and she encountered much resistance from the board members who were all men. She went on to say that:

> With the passage of time things started unsettling as the board members made it more complex and difficult for me to fulfil my responsibilities within the given time frame and the budget, which was frustrating. The Chairman started calling me to his office unnecessarily rather than responding on email, to discuss petty matters and imposing his orders and authority. My self-respect started compromising so, I eventually quit.

Similar to Mahrukh, Hania — who is a development practitioner and is not married — faced severe resistance when she acquired a leadership position in her organisation. Hania explained:

> There were two females in the first organisation that I joined i.e., the Program manager

> and me. When my manager was leaving after four months, she said that I will be the acting manager. All 48 males retaliated to this decision. They were not ready to work under me as their boss. When 48 people rejected this decision I was emotionally and mentally disturbed. I was extremely hard working and the only reason I could see which would be the cause of the retaliation was my gender. Getting accepted as a female leader wasn't going to be easy. I was 24 at that time. I could not sustain the pressure so after some months I shifted to another city to join a new project.

Gendered expectations and narratives of defiance

In comparison to Mahrukh and Hania, there were also instances of women who occupied leadership positions and had developed different coping strategies to contest the resistance of men. For example, Noor Jahan — who works in the power and telecom sector and is not married, shared that when she was new to the leadership role, she encountered many difficulties from her the male colleagues.

> I knew from the start that it was going to be difficult for men to accept me on the leadership position. As a result, I tried to create an amicable environment. I tried to ignore episode when men would speak over me in meetings. However, I realized with time that the men saw my behaviour of creating an amicable environment as my weakness. They considered me a submissive and weak person. It is at this point that I decided to become extremely straightforward, adopted a stricter tone and would raise my voice firmly if someone tried to speak over me. I became more forceful and assertive in my communication.

Noor Jahan felt that adopting a stricter attitude, tone and stopping her male colleagues when they tried to talk over her worked for her and with time the resistance started to diminish.

Ruqqiya— who is married and occupies a leadership positions in a non-profit organisation— also emphasized that she had to become more forceful and assertive in her ideas and opinions when she started in her leadership position. It is apparent from these examples that adopting traits that were associated with masculinity such as being assertive and forceful in their conversations made these women more acceptable in their leadership positions.

The findings in this section illustrates the importance of the term Think Manager–Think Male coined by Schein et al. (1996) as a prominent factor that fosters gender bias in the workplace. The findings show how workplace gender bias originates from the incongruity that exists between an individual's gender and the perceived skills and characteristics required for a

management or leadership position. We can see the cultural stereotypes at work in these narratives pointing towards the status quo of male power and inequalities in organisations by deeming women lacking in the necessary characteristics and skills to occupy managerial or leadership positions.

However, the findings also show that despite this discrimination, women are developing strategies to counter these experiences. These findings contribute towards research that focusses on examining strategies that women are adopting to overcome disadvantages they encounter in their workplace (Duchek et al., 2022; Jogulu & Franken, 2022). At the same time though, it is important to mention here that along with focusing on the strategies women build to counter male bias in the workplace, it is equally important to address patriarchal structures in the workplace and wider society, that place women in a position of disadvantage. Without structural changes, women will have to carry the responsibility of contesting gender bias in the workplace themselves, which will not change the systemic disadvantage that women face.

Toxic masculinity and cultural expectations of honour

The data further revealed that sexual harassment is a significant issue faced by working women in Pakistan. The participants discussed their experiences of sexual harassment and strategies used by managers to discourage them from reporting these crimes. Jaweria — who is a journalist and is presently employed—described how she lost her job at a local media channel because she reported a senior official at work for touching her inappropriately on numerous occasions. Jaweria shared:

> I encountered sexual harassment while working at a local media channel. On two occasions, a senior official deliberately brushed his hand across my back. Initially, due to the crowded office environment, I gave him the benefit of the doubt. However, upon realizing his deliberate actions and witnessing his smirk, I confronted the issue. Speaking with other female colleagues, I discovered he had a reputation as a serial harasser, but they refrained from reporting him due to his powerful position and fear of damaging their own reputation. Driven by my upbringing as an assertive individual who stands up for my rights, I reported the incident. Unfortunately, the management took no action and instead terminated my contract. I was told by a colleague a few months later that the reason why I got sacked was that I reported that guy.

Similarly, Sadia —who was previously employed as a lecturer—, experienced harassment while working at an elite university, but instead of firing the aggressor, her boss encouraged

her to ignore the behaviour. Sadia explained:

> So, one of the reasons why I left my job was the toxic working environment and the harassment issues. I was associated with a very elite university, but they did not have any proper laws in place to deal with sexual harassment issues. There were instances when I was continuously harassed by a male colleague. I decided to report him and spoke to my boss. But my boss just told me to ignore it. That guy went on to harass female students as well, but my boss did not do anything about it. It was this toxic male culture, where men cover the wrongdoings of other men. The poor female students didn't have the courage to speak against him because of the fear of losing their reputation. This weird notion of honour restricts females from speaking up. Anyways, when nothing was done even after reporting that guy, again and again, I ended up quitting my job.

The experiences of these two women clearly indicate the power disparity that exists between men and women in the workplace. In both of these examples, the women were advised by their male managers that they should not make complaints. Instead of support from the management for being harassed, one of the participants was fired and the other was forced to resign. This illustrates how women in Pakistan are victimised when they speak up against harassment in their organisations (Ali & Kramar, 2015; Sarwar & Imran, 2019). The support the male perpetrators received from management reflects how the structures and policies within a workplace are influenced by macro level cultural values and social norms existing in the society that place women in a subordinate position to men.

In comparison to Jaweria and Sadia, the other participants who spoke about the harassment issues decided to stay silent on the issue and not report it. The results suggest that the 'honour' badge that is attached to women helps prevent them from voicing their concerns over men's harassment. Unless and until workplaces hold men accountable for their actions, women will continue to face barriers to expressing their voice. For example, Ansa — who is employed as a lecturer— shared:

> Men in our society know they can get away with their snarky and derogatory comments. Recently, I had to get clearance for a project. The man who I had to get clearance from started to call me and message me at night. I could not give him a shut-up call because I needed clearance from him. If I did, I knew my project's clearance would get delayed. And even more important than that was risking my reputation by

> complaining against him. I knew from experiences of others how instead of men being held accountable for their actions, a woman's reputation is maligned. For the fear of losing my respect, I stayed quiet. I eventually left that place.

The participants indicated that there were no explicit or well-defined procedures established for reporting incidents of sexual harassment in their respective workplaces. The lack of proper procedure for women to lodge a complaint against male perpetrators can be identified as a way of reinforcing the cultural script of maintaining dominance of men over women by keeping women silent.

Discussion

This paper investigated the impact of diverse contextual factors within a woman's environment on their employment choices and experiences using an ecological framework to guide the analyses. By utilizing data from in depth interviews, this paper aimed to explore the multifaceted interactions that occur within a woman's environment and how they influence her decision-making process. The findings of this study provide clear evidence of the significant role that relationships, cultural values, and social norms play in shaping women's employment opportunities and outcomes. Furthermore, it highlights the agency of women in navigating and challenging discriminatory practices through their support systems and personal strategies.

There are four key findings in our study. First, culturally ascribed roles of women as mothers and primary care takers placed a significant burden on women who were married, had children, and were employed. The lack of support in managing these responsibilities was a key reason some women in this study quit their employment. These findings align with studies that highlight how the double burden of paid and unpaid work prevents women from remaining in the labour force over the long term (Syed et al., 2018). The findings further add to the broader body of literature demonstrating that even if women are in employment, domestic/caring responsibilities remain the primary responsibility of women, especially within conservative societies (Khurshid, 2017). The findings also show the importance of marriage in a Pakistani woman's life, highlighting the need to examine and respond to the cultural primacy of marriage and its significance on women's employment decisions.

Second, workplace practices and norms are established on a male model of work. This model, based on factors such as long working hours, make it difficult for women to combine their domestic/caring responsibilities with the demands of the workplace. Ultimately, this led many

women in our study to quit their employment. The lack of childcare services was another significant factor that contributed to some women in the study leaving the labour force. Crucially, however, informal support, particularly in the form of childcare, was an important enabling factor that allowed women to remain the labour force.

The findings pertaining to the workplace showed how women are disadvantaged when it comes to leadership positions and that this disadvantage is acute for women who are married and have children. The findings align with studies that show how norms and values within a workplace disadvantage woman by propagating a male model of work that fails to take into consideration women's domestic/caring responsibilities (Kaduk et al., 2019; Thebaud, 2016). This speaks to the crucial need for policy efforts to address the broader cultural gendered expectations that influence the structure of workplaces.

Third, the findings highlighted the importance of the notion of honour that forces women to stay silent in instances of workplace harassment (Ali & Kramer, 2015; Sarwar & Imran, 2019). The findings related to harassment also show that male perpetrators are rarely held accountable for their actions even when women make official complaints. The data revealed that in instances where women did have the courage to report harassment, instead of the male perpetrators being punished, the women were either fired or forced to quit.

Fourth, three main enabling factors emerged that supported women to resist patriarchal structures. The first was the self-belief women had in achieving their employment and career goals. Fathers' encouragement and motivation from a young age was a significant factor in creating and nourishing these beliefs. Secondly, husbands' support after marriage also emerged as a significant factor enabling women to pursue employment. Thirdly, the data showed the importance of adopting traits such as assertiveness and forcefulness within the workplace to maintain leadership positions. This finding contributes towards the growing body of literature that focusses on examining the mechanisms women develop to contest discrimination in the workplace especially within leadership roles (Duchek et al., 2022).

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that policymakers, academics, and practitioners must approach the challenges that women face in employment at a number of levels. In light of these findings, it would be naïve to assume that merely devising equal opportunity policies will lead to an increase in women's engagement with the labour market. Rather, in addition to

employment policies that support equal opportunities for women and men, there is a need to develop—and effectively enforce—policies that can focus on informing cultural and family change to support women to engage and succeed in Pakistan's labour market.

For example, our findings identify, domestic and caring responsibilities as major barriers preventing women from pursuing employment. The implementation of policies such as affordable day care centres is mostly seen as a solution to alleviate this burden and enable women's workforce participation. However, cultural and social attitudes towards such policies need to be considered, including concerns about women being viewed as inadequate mothers or resistance from husbands due to traditional gender roles. It is crucial for policies to not only provide childcare but also through advocacy and social awareness campaigns promote it as a positive development that supports children's education and development and that fosters societal acceptance of women pursuing careers after having children. Electronic and social media platforms can be used as potential avenue for raising awareness about the necessity of transforming existing cultural values and social norms that maintain the traditional caregiver and breadwinner model within in the domestic and workplace systems. Furthermore, to counter these traditional gender roles governments and organisations should actively encourage fathers to take paternal leave. This approach can facilitate in creating a supportive environment for fathers to engage in childcare, thus challenging traditional gender roles, and shifting societal attitudes towards caregiving responsibilities.

Our research further indicates that Pakistani women face significant barriers in speaking out against harassment due to the association of their name with honour and modesty. Workplace norms and societal values further contribute to this issue, as women fear reputational damage if they report harassment incidents. In such contexts, workplace policies alone are insufficient in resolving this problem, as it is deeply rooted in cultural and social factors. Addressing this problem requires launching social awareness campaigns that challenge the narrative of shame and honour surrounding harassment. These campaigns can leverage social media and television platforms to raise awareness about women's rights to speak out and hold perpetrators accountable. By shifting the blame from women to the perpetrators, these campaigns may assist to eliminate the shame associated with reporting harassment issues.

Conclusion

Our study adopted an ecological systems approach to examine the experiences of employed and previously employed women in the developing, patriarchal, and collectivist socio-cultural

context of Pakistan. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the interactions between various systems that influence women's employment decisions and experiences. It further facilitated in understanding the significant role of relationships in a woman's life; relationships that can serve to disadvantage certain women, and relationships that are enabling support systems for other women in helping them to overcome traditional cultural values and social norms. Furthermore, it revealed how workplace structures mirror the cultural models prevalent in the Pakistani society that disadvantages women, while also highlighting the agency of women in adopting strategies to counter discrimination.

Although our study has provided important insights into women's decisions and experiences related to employment, it has certain limitations. Firstly, the narratives discussed may not encompass all experiences due to limitations in research design, sample size, and regional diversity in Pakistan. Different dimensions such as religiosity, socio-economic status, family structures, employment patterns, and educational trends can influence perspectives across provinces. Secondly, our focus on highly educated women may overlook the unique challenges faced by less educated women in the labour market. Thirdly, we did not explore the experiences of women who have never been employed, indicating the need for further research to inform policymaking and implementation.

To address these limitations, future research might expand on our study by including a more diverse and larger sample of women from different regions of Pakistan. This would provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and decision-making processes related to employment among Pakistani women. Longitudinal studies could also be conducted to assess the long-term impacts of social awareness campaigns and policy interventions aimed at addressing barriers to reporting harassment and promoting women's employment. By tracking changes over time in attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes, such studies can offer valuable insights into the effectiveness and sustainability of these interventions. Additionally, investigating the intersectionality of gender with other social identities, such as religion, would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by women in pursuing employment.

In conclusion, future research should continue to explore the complex interplay of cultural, social, and institutional factors that shape women's decisions and experiences related to employment. By addressing the limitations of our study and delving deeper into the diverse

realities of Pakistani women, researchers can contribute to informed policymaking and the development of effective interventions to support women in the labour market.

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