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Navigating Gender Norms: An Exploratory Study on the Labour Market Experiences of Women with Higher Education in Pakistan

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Abstract

Purpose – This study explores how gender norms shape the experiences of women with higher education in their decisions to enter the labour market in Pakistan. While previous research highlights the influence of cultural and societal expectations on female labour force participation (FLFP), there remains a gap in understanding the nuanced ways these norms affect their lived experiences and career choices.

Design/methodology/approach – This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews with purposively selected women who have attained higher education. The data from the interviews was analysed using thematic analysis, which allowed key themes to emerge from the participants' perspectives.

Findings – This study finds that gender norms strongly influence both women's entry into the labour market and their workplace experiences in Pakistan. Participants identified familial expectations and cultural pressures as key factors shaping career decisions, while workplace challenges included balancing household duties, male-dominated environments, and subtle discrimination.

Implications – The findings of this study highlight how deeply rooted gender norms shape women's career decisions, and workplace experiences in Pakistan. This research offers insights for policymakers, employers, NGOs, and gender-focused initiatives aiming to increase female labour force participation.

Originality/value – The findings of this research provide nuanced, qualitative insights into how gender norms shape the career decisions and workplace experiences of educated women in Pakistan., instead of the broader quantitative approach adopted by much of the existing literature.

Key words: FLFP; Gender norms; Gender discrimination; Pakistan; Thematic analysis; Female labour force participation

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1. Introduction

A country's economic performance is shaped by a wide range of different factors, such as institutional ruggedness, level of economic freedom, government effectiveness, effectiveness of law, dependence on foreign aid, average level of education of labour, and so on (Hamid & Habib, 2013). One of these factors is female labour force participation (Mujahid, 2013).

There are many studies that highlight the significant influence of gender norms on various life choices and labour market outcomes, including women's workforce participation, fertility, marriage dynamics, childcare decisions, caregiving roles, the gender pay gap, education, and entrepreneurship (Fernández & Fogli, 2009; Zafar, 2013; Bertrand et al., 2015). This study aims to explore how gender norms and values shape the decision-making process of educated women entering the labour force, and their experiences at the workplace, in Pakistan. In this study, "gender norms" or "gender roles" are defined as the expectations of the different roles of men and women, including participating in the labour market. Women make up half of the global population and, therefore, half of the world's potential labour force. However, there is a significant difference between the labour force participation (LFP) of men and women. Worldwide in 2024, female labour force participation (FLFP) between the age of 15 and 64 was 54.9%, which is significantly lower than the LFP of males of the same year and age bracket, at 79.1% (ILO, 2025). Women's participation in the labour force differs from men in its dynamic, in the sense that women have a higher tendency to leave and/or re-enter the market through-out the various stages of their lives (Sarkar et al., 2019). For example, a study examined women's employment shifts after becoming mothers in a few European countries and concluded that there was a significant increase in women quitting work in both Germany and Spain, while the increase was significantly lower for men (Gutierrez-Domenech, 2005). The authors also noted that a significant percentage of women with full-time jobs who did not quit after having a baby moved to part-time roles.

Developing countries on average have much lower FLFPs than developed countries, that is also the case with South Asian countries, including Pakistan, which will be the primary focus in this study. Literature has shown a general trend of increasing FLFP with increasing average female literacy. According to Chaudhary and Sher (2014), the gender disparity is highest in South Asian countries when we talk about labour force participation rates (LFPR). Globally, South Asia has one of the lowest female labour force participation rates, along with the Middle East and North African region (Kapsos et al., 2014). According to ILO (2024), if we exclude Afghanistan, Pakistan has the lowest FLFP amongst the major South Asian countries.

Therefore, this study aims to explore the following research question: How do gender norms shape the experiences of educated women in their decision to enter the labour market, and their experiences at the workplace, in Pakistan?

To answer the research question, this study employed a qualitative approach by using semi-structured interviews with educated women in Pakistan. This study explored women's experiences and perspectives on how gender norms influence their decision to participate in the labour market, as well as their experiences within the workplace. Then, thematic analysis was performed on the interview data, and the study was able to identify complex recurring patterns and themes, which highlighted underlying social and cultural dynamics, and provided much more nuanced insights that go beyond just economic explanations of women's labour force participation.

Considering this, this dissertation contributes to the literature in several ways. Firstly, it addresses a gap in the literature, on how gender norms shape women's labour market experiences in Pakistan. Although much of the existing literature takes a broader approach, like macroeconomic trends and quantitative surveys, this study provides a more in-depth qualitative approach to gather insights on women's perspectives. By achieving this, this study offers more nuanced understanding of the culture and social barriers that persist, even for women with higher education. Lastly, beyond the academic value, the findings of this dissertation carry implications for policy makers, NGOs, and employers that might seek to design interventions and workplace practices that address the gendered constraints on women's participation in the workforce.

2. Literature Review

Female labour force participation (FLFP) is influenced by numerous factors, ranging from macro-level to factors that are more on a personal level (Lari et al., 2022). While there are both demand-side and supply-side factors that influence FLFP in a country, this study will primarily focus on the supply-side, especially how gender-based expectations, or gender norms, influence FLFP. Gender norms are defined as "social norms defining acceptable and appropriate actions for women and men in a given group or society. They are embedded in formal and informal institutions, nested in the mind, and produced and reproduced through social interaction" (Cislaghi & Heise, 2020, p. 416).

2.1. Gender Norms and FLFP – A Global Perspective

Reskin and Bielby (2005) discussed that gender-specific behaviours and expectations exist through out the world, however, how strong these differences between gender expectations are varies over time and region (Janssen et al., 2016). According to Akerlof and Kranton's (2000) thoery of identity economics, which takes into account psychological and sociological concepts of identy, individuals in areas with stronger traditional gender norms experience greater psychological and social costs when working in roles typically linked to the opposite gender, such as, contribution to household chores.

There are many studies across the world that have researched how gender expectations about women's role within and outside the household create expectations for women to be more focused on household chores and child-rearing, irrespective of whether or not the woman was participating in the labour force (Bittman et al., 2003; Sayer, 2005; Cassidy & Warren, 1996). Several studies have shown that men spend more time doing household chores if they have more egalitarian gender role attitudes as opposed to when they have more traditional gender role attitudes (Blair & Lichter, 1991; Kamo, 1994; Presser, 1994). In general around the world, the gender role attitudes towards female participation in the labour force have become more egalitarian, which has led to a general positive trend in FLFP (Bolzendahl & Myers, 2004; Loo & Thorpe, 1998; Spence & Hahn, 2006). However, even for a developed country like the United Staes, a large gender gap still exists in the amount of time spent doing household chores. Even with the increased participation of women in the labour, and men in household chores, women still end up doing 65% to 80% of household chores, in the US (Bianchi et al., 2000; Coltrane, 2000). Bolzendahl and Myers (2004), and Chuang and Lee (2008) studied the influence of men's gender role attitudes on women's labour

force participation, and concluded that women's participation in paid labour was positively influenced if their husbands had more egalitarian gender role attitudes. As Corrigall and Konrad (2007) noted, family income from other sources than jobs or labour likely plays a part in the decision-making process for women. According to Corrigall and Konrad (2007) "If there is sufficient family income from other sources, they may choose to forgo or reduce paid work time to meet unpaid family obligations" (p. 848). A comparative study of Egypt and Germany focused on the factors, such as educational, personal, and household-related, that influence female labour force participation in Egypt, and comparing the effects with Germany (Hosney, 2016). This study concluded that although gender norms do significantly influence FLFP in both countries, there are certain differences. In Egypt for example, traditional gender attitudes have more of a restrictive role than in Germany where gender attitudes are more egalitarian. As Hosney (2016) has shown, in Germany, where institutional frameworks like parental leaves are much more facilitating catering than in Egypt, women are less likely to do part-time work or leave their jobs entirely after having children. The likelihood of women leaving their jobs entirely as a result of increased household chores after having a child are higher in Egypt.

2.2. Gender Norms and FLFP in South Asia

Bridges et al., (2011) shed light on the impacts of poverty, and more importantly for this study, the influence of gender norms on women's participation in the labour market in Bangladesh, another South Asian country like Pakistan. Their study found that rigid social and cultural norms play a big part in restricting female participation in the labour force, especially in the rural areas, and highlighted the complex relationship between poverty, gender norms, and labour market outcomes. Another study investigated how conservatism affects labour force participation in Turkey, and concluded that women's employment decisions are heavily shaped by their environment, particularly in conservative and traditional areas where men have greater decision-making power, which leads to many educated women ending up as housewives (Göksel, 2013). A Turkish study examined how patriarchal norms and religion shape the female labour supply in the country and found out that traditional gender norms and patriarchal values have a negative association with women's labour force participation (Dildar, 2015). Dildar (2015) confirmed the findings of previous literature using her analysis, that there is a positive impact of education but a negative impact of childcare obligations on female labour force participation (FLFP). In India, Deshpande and Kabeer (2024) found that women who are expected to be primarily responsible for domestic chores have a lower probability of engaging in the labour market. In addition, they

discovered that the existence of 'virtuous cycles' within families, i.e., if the family had a history of having working women, significantly increased the probability for a woman to be currently participating in the labour market. In most of South Asia, social and cultural norms still have a strong influence on shaping women's decisions regarding labour market participation (Adeel et al., 2016). The authors went on to explain how the restrictions on women's mobility in South Asian countries play a contributing role in shaping gender roles related to household duties, and therefore, influencing FLFP. In Bangladesh, Ahmed and Sen (2018) noted that household conservatism is strongly associated with reduced female participation in the labour market. Just like much of the already existing literature, Ahmed and Sen (2018) also found out that women in conservative households face more barriers than women in less or non-conservative households, and are more likely to be self-employed when employed. Another study in India showed that social or gender norms heavily influence women's inclusion in the labour market, with more often than not, being included in home-related work (Kantor, 2009). Furthermore, this study pointed out that an increased level of household responsibilities, such as the presence of young children, had a strong negative correlation with FLFP in that household.

2.3. Gender Norms and FLFP in Pakistan

Female labour force participation in Pakistan has remained significantly lower than the regional averages, despite a growth of about 9 percent of the past three decades (Amber & Chichaibelu, 2023). Arif et al. (2003) investigated labour market dynamics using panel data from the Pakistan Socio-Economic Survey (PSES) and found that women's transitions from unemployment to employment are slow in Pakistan. They also discovered that age and marital status negatively influence the transition from employment to unemployment. Furthermore, women without higher education were more likely to lose their jobs compared to those with higher education. Shah et al. (1986) examined the changing role of Pakistani women in the society from 1951 to 1981 and concluded that women's decision to participate in the labour force is negatively influenced by the socio-economic status of their families. In addition, they also discussed other factors such as, the husband's education and whether or not the woman used purdah (a social and cultural practice in Pakistan that involves the seclusion of women) which were also identified as key determinants in this relationship. Ejaz (2007) studied the factors influencing female labour force participation in Pakistan by using probit and logit models on micro data from women aged 15-49. Her findings indicated that age, education, and marital status have significant positive effects on female labour force participation (FLFP). Women from nuclear families and those with access to a vehicle were

more likely to engage in economic activities, while having many children and access to home appliances decreased the likelihood of participation.

Ejaz (2007) concluded that for Pakistan in general, the women are more likely to stay at home, as opposed to only 3% of the male population staying at home. Furthermore, women on average travel 50% times less and at the same time have 46% shorter travel times as compared to men. There are studies that have investigated the effect of marriage on the likelihood of a woman participating in the labour market. For example, in Pakistan, Ejaz (2011) revealed that being unmarried had a positive effect on the likelihood of participating in the labour market. However, after a woman gets married, the responsibilities increase, especially child-rearing and hence due to time constraints, the likelihood of the woman participating in work decreases.

2.4. Theoretical Perspectives on Gender Norms and FLFP in Pakistan

A study that explored the impact of gender norms on women's workforce participation in Pakistan found that cultural expectations and societal pressures significantly influence their decisions (Amber, 2024). Furthermore, this study explored the way traditional gender roles, family responsibilities, and cultural perceptions influence women's labour market engagement. By analysing these structural barriers, Amber (2024) highlighted the importance of policy interventions and workplace reforms that challenge restrictive norms and promote women's inclusion. Amber and Chichaibelu (2023) employ a feminist lens to examine the "M-shaped" FLFP curve in their findings. This M-shaped curve shows a dip in employment during what are considered "child-rearing" years. This decline is further encouraged by traditional gender roles imposed on women, where motherhood and a career are often seen as mutually exclusive in Pakistan's society, and women are frequently encouraged, or even pressured, into leaving their jobs after becoming mothers (Amber & Chichaibelu, 2023). To tackle this issue and ensure that women in the labour force are not forced into making this binary choice, it is imperative to challenge these traditional gender roles and initiate a gradual shift in society's one-dimensional expectations of women. The study called for policy interventions as well as institutional support for women returning to work after childbirth, such as the provision of appropriate childcare options, flexible work schedules, and remote work opportunities (Amber & Chichaibelu, 2023). Similarly, Faridi et al. (2009), in their study of the socio-economic and demographic determinants of FLFP in the Bahawalpur District, found that the level of education received by the mother and the "number of children present in the home", meaning the level of childcare responsibilities on the mother, affect a woman's ability to rejoin the labour force in Pakistan. This study reinforces the M-shaped

FLFP trend of the previous study, concluding that FLFP declines during a woman's child-rearing years (Faridi et al., 2009). Their study encourages increasing women's access to higher education as well in order to enhance their skill level and economic opportunity with better-paying jobs. Both studies, in tandem, reveal the structural, alongside the cultural, shortcomings of Pakistan's societal landscape that have for years kept women out of the labour force. To ensure the inclusion of women calls for comprehensive policy interventions by the government as well as addressing harmful, binary gender norms that limit a woman's role in the labour market. For a developing economy like Pakistan, the inclusion of women in the labour force is crucial. To ensure their sustained participation in the labour force, it is pertinent to understand the nuances and barriers of women in Pakistan (Faridi et al., 2009).

2.5. Gaps in Existing Literature

It can be established that social norms have a high influence on the likelihood of women participating in the labour force in South Asia, but traditional gender norms also have a negative effect on other determinants of FLFP, where level of education is one of the most prominent ones (Heath & Jayachandran, 2017). Hence, other than the direct negative impact of conservative gender norms on FLFP, there are also indirect impacts that further reduce the likelihood of female participation in the labour market for a given household. For example, a study in Pakistan revealed that gender-specific resource allocation within households often means lower priority for girls, thus decreasing the average education received as compared to boys, which in turn makes women less likely to be able to participate in the labour force in the future (Sawada & Lokshin, 2008). This study also revealed the impact of father's and mother's education levels, where higher levels of education of both parents collectively, or one parent individually, had a positive impact on the likelihood of their daughter's schooling.

Although, as shown, there are numerous studies in South Asia, and even Pakistan specifically, that have researched on the influence of traditional gender norms on female participation, there is a gap in the literature where one studies how having traditional gender role attitudes influences educated women's decision to enter the labour market. In this study, "educated women" is defined as women who have at least completed their bachelor's degree and are eligible to enter the corporate labour market of Pakistan. Almost all the literature that has been reviewed this far does not categorize educated women into different levels and quality of education. The purpose of this study is to understand how traditional gender roles shape the experience of decision making of

women with higher education in entering the labour market in Pakistan, and their experiences at the workplace.

3. Methodology

This section starts with a brief overview about the methodologies employed in similar studies. Then, the selected methodology for this paper is discussed, followed by the sampling, and the interview design and procedure. Finally, the data analysis that was conducted after the collection and processing of data is discussed extensively.

This study aims to explore how the traditional gender roles in the Pakistani society shape the experience of educated women's decision to enter the labour market, and how they shape their workplace experiences.

3.1 Methodological approaches of similar studies

Over the years, studies on female labour force participation (FLFP) and its correlates have taken a wide variety of factors into account, while using various methodological approaches. Table 1 presents a synthesis of the different methodologies used in similar studies in different countries and regions.

It can be noted that the data collection method for most of the studies is the questionnaire, and most of them used secondary data sources. For example, Stam et al (2014) used data by Longitudinal Internet Studies for the Social sciences (LISS), which is a panel study that was conducted in the Netherlands between 2007 and 2010 and includes information on 5,000 households. Another study in China used survey data of Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), which is a social survey project at Renmin University of China, which collects data at different levels of society, community, and family (Chuanchuan & Jingwen, 2021). For almost all these studies, the respondents were women, both married and unmarried. However, there are examples, such as Corrigall and Konrad (2007), where the respondents were men as well, along with women. There was a study in India that conducted detailed, in-depth interviews with 15 female entrepreneurs (Pareek & Bagrecha, 2017). The methodology selection for this study will be discussed extensively in section 3.2.

Author	Country or region of study	Sample size	Focus group	Data collection method	Data analysis method
Stam et al. (2014)	The Netherlands	1818 people	Women of age 25-55	Questionnaires	Descriptive analysis

Corrigall and Konrad (2007)	United States of America	3452 people	Men and women of age 19-30	Questionnaires	Inferential statistical analysis
Setyonaluri and Shirota (2019)	Indonesia	7095 people	Women of age 15-49	Questionnaires	Time to event analysis
Chuanchuan and Jingwen (2021)	China	3871 people	Women below age of 55	Questionnaires	Inferential statistical analysis
Kantor (2009)	India	480 house-holds	Men and women of age 18 and higher	Interviews and Focus Group Discussions	Thematic analysis
Jaidwal and Sharma (2024)	India	Not applicable	Not applicable	Literature Review	Thematic analysis
Topić and Tench (2020)	Europe	25,000-28,000	Women of age 18 and higher	Questionnaires	Thematic analysis
Pareek and Bagrecha (2017)	India	15	Women of age 18 and higher	Interviews	Thematic analysis

Table 1 – Methodological considerations of similar studies

3.2. Methodology selection

Unlike most of the studies in table 1, the nature of this study leans more towards exploration of the topic at hand and the research question. There are many studies that have explained how interviews, as opposed to questionnaires, are more suitable for research areas that require in-depth exploration of a topic, flexibility, and allow for follow-up questions (Kuter & Yilmaz, 2001; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Kvale, 2012). According to Creswell and Poth (2016) interview designs can have various forms and can be developed to obtain rich and deep data. Gall et al. (1996) have identified and explored three formats of interview designs for qualitative studies: (a) informal

conversational interview, (b) general interview guide approach, and (c) standardized open-end interview. General interview guide approach (b), which falls under the category of semi-structured interviews, was deemed to be the most appropriate design for this study for several reasons. Firstly, it offers a balance between structure and flexibility which allows the researcher to ensure that all key themes that are relevant to this study are covered while also giving them the flexibility to adapt questions based on participants' responses, resulting in a deeper exploration of their experiences. Secondly, this format allows the researcher to ask the participants to elaborate on something specific that might be of interest, and because this format is not rigid on wording, the respondents are more likely to feel like they are having a conversation, making it more likely for them to discuss openly about a sensitive topic, like the one in this study. Finally, the general interview guide approach enables thematic and qualitative coding while providing a structured framework that simplifies the identification of patterns across interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2016). According to Makri and Neely (2021) semi-structured interviews is widely accepted as the most suitable method for studies where the aim is to investigate a topic deeply without predefined hypothesis, further supporting the case for this type of interview to be the most suitable one for this study. Because this research aimed to explore how gender norms shape the experience of educated women entering the labour market, and their experiences within the workplaces in Pakistan, semi-structured interviews allowed for open-ended exploration which uncovered relevant themes and perspectives. These themes will be discussed extensively in Section 4. Semi-structured interviews, as opposed to the other types of interviews, offer a good balance between a restricted structure, and open-endedness (Turner, 2010). This means that the interviewer can ask follow-up questions based on a participant's response which allows for a deeper exploration of the questions at hand, which is critical in a qualitative study like this one. For these reasons, the semi-structured interview methodology was deemed the most appropriate for this study.

3.3. Sampling

This section outlines the sampling approach adopted in this study and provides an overview of the participants interviewed. Subsection 3.3.1 details the sampling strategy, the criteria used for participant selection, justification for the chosen methods, and considerations regarding the sample size. Finally, subsection 3.3.2 presents an overview of all the participants that were interviewed to offer context for interpreting the findings.

3.3.1. Sampling strategy

There were several criteria that needed to be defined when selecting the interviewees, such as educational background, gender, geographic context, and age range.

The participants were required to have at least a bachelor's degree to ensure they had access to higher education and formal career opportunities, which made their decision to enter (or not enter) the labour market in Pakistan more reflective of the potential influence from traditional gender norms, as Husain (2005) has discussed how having a higher level of education in Pakistan plays a role in landing a better employment opportunity. Although some similar studies have included both men and women, such as Corrigall and Konrad (2007) and Kantor (2009), the participants for the interviews in this study were women exclusively. The reason for interviewing women only was that this study focused on specifically women's opinions and experiences regarding the influence of gender norms in the Pakistani society. The participants were selected from urban cities, as the employment opportunities in rural areas of Pakistan are usually informal, which makes finding formal work next to impossible, which would have resulted in a biased conclusion. To capture the active career related decision-making years, the study focused solely on women between the age of 20 to 30.

There are many studies that support purposive sampling for selecting participants when specific groups are thought to have unique and important perspective on the research topic (Campbell et al., 2020; Mason, 2017; Robinson, 2014). Along with this reason, and to make sure that the participants possessed specific characteristics aligned with the research question in this study, such as being educated and falling into the selected age bracket, purposive sampling was chosen. The first group of participants selected were reached out by the researcher using his own personal contacts and resided in different cities of Pakistan. As noted by Khalid (2021), while traditional gender norms are prevalent across Pakistan, some regions might have more traditional gender norms than other. After the first group was selected using purposive sampling, the researcher expanded the sample through snowball sampling which allowed the sample to contain a broader network of eligible respondents. Snowball sampling was chosen for two main reasons. Firstly, according to Parker et al. (2019), it is a proven method of choosing specific and niche groups, Pakistani women navigating gender norms in the case of this study. Secondly, the referrals often give access to participants who are more open and willing to engage in conversation that might be deemed sensitive to talk about. The study has shown that snowball sampling allows researchers to access populations that might potentially feel stigmatized, desire anonymity, be sensitive or vulnerable to the topic of discussion at hand, and require a minimum level of trust in order to

become a more engaging participant (Parker et al., 2019). Woodley and Lockard (2016) acknowledged the criticisms of snowball sampling but supported its value in reached marginalized groups and emphasized the role of social networking in highlighting counter-narratives.

There are some challenges of snowball sampling that need to acknowledged. There is an inherent flaw in snowball sampling, which is that the researcher initially relies on their personal connections and resources, and then the next participants are recruited from a limited pool of initial contacts, which means there is a risk of early distortion in the research (Parker et al., 2019). Another problem is the possibility of what Parker er al. (2019) call the 'snowball failing to roll', meaning new participants cannot be recruited due to insufficient referrals or a lack of willing participants. Keeping these limitations in mind, and the advantages of snowball sampling already discussed in this section, the benefits were found to outweigh the downsides, especially for a study such as this.

The idea of coming up with a numerical guideline that may help researchers in deciding the sample size of their qualitative research has been a topic of debate for decades (Vasileiou et al., 2018; Morse, 2000; Kindsiko & Poltimae, 2019). Bekele and Ago (2022) concluded that the decision of 'how many interviews' depends on several factors such as the quality of data, the nature of the topic, the scope of the study. Baker and Edwards (2012) went into detail investigating what the ideal number of interviews for a qualitative study should be, and determined that researchers should aim for data saturation which means that interviews should be conducted until new data no longer contributes additional insights to the research objective. It was concluded in the same study that most of researchers suggest the number of interviews to be between 12 and 60, with 30 being a common mean. A qualitative study can use a small, purposively chosen sample with the intent of enhancing the depth of the understanding of the topic (Palinkas et al., 2015). Building on these findings and considering the depth of the interviews, this study aimed at least 16 participants, but if the later interviews are still adding valuable insights as discussed by Baker and Edwards (2012), up to 10 more will be included. In the end, 17 interviews were conducted in total in this study. Following the guidelines offered by Baker and Edwards (2012), it was observed that additional insights stopped emerging after the 7th interview, and therefore, 10 addition interviews were conducted. Which satisfied the original target of 16 interviews and also the guidelines offered by Baker and Edwards (2012).

3.3.2. Participant Overview

Table 2 provides an overview of the participants that were interviewed in this study, including key demographics to contextualize their perspectives in the findings section.

Participant number	Professional area	Education level	City	Marital status
1	Research	Bachelor's	Islamabad	Un-married
2	Human Resources	Bachelor's	Islamabad	Un-married
3	N/A (no work experience in Pakistan yet)	Master's	Islamabad	Un-married
4	Data science	Master's	Karachi	Married
5	Data science	Master's	Karachi	Un-married
6	Marketing	Bachelor's	Karachi	Un-married
7	Economics & climate change	Master's	Islamabad	Un-married
8	Education	Master's	Lahore	Un-married
9	Operations	Bachelor's	Islamabad	Un-married
10	Marketing	Master's	Karachi	Un-married
11	Medical/Healthcare	Bachelor's	Islamabad	Married
12	Human Resources	Master's	Lahore	Un-married
13	Research	Master's	Lahore	Un-married
14	Marketing	Bachelor's	Karachi	Un-married
15	Engineering	Bachelor's	Lahore	Un-married
16	Ecommerce	Master's	Lahore	Married
17	Engineering	Bachelor's	Islamabad	Un-married

Table 2 – Participant overview

3.4. Interview Design and Procedure

The key question of "What specific information do I need to get from the respondents during the interview?" needed to be answered before moving on to the actual design of the interview. To answer this, the interview design needed to be constructed in a way that it would explore the participants' perception of gender norms, their personal experiences in navigating these norms, and how these factors influenced their decision to enter the labour market.

The final interview design (see Appendix A) was based on the five key phases framework by Kallio et al. (2016), with the phases being: identifying the precondition for using semi-structured interviews, retrieving and using previous knowledge, formulating preliminary interview questions, pilot testing the interview guide, and presenting the complete semi-structured interview guide.

Using this framework, the final interview was designed to have three sections: introductory section, in-depth section, and concluding section. The interview questions specifically were constructed to follow the 'general interview guide approach' format as previously explained. As suggested by Gall et al. (1996), it is important to ask open-ended questions which remained true for all the questions asked in the interviews for this study. For example, one of the questions in the introductory section of the interview design is "What are your general thoughts on gender roles and gendered expectations in Pakistan?". This question allows the respondent to discuss what her general thoughts on gendered expectations and gender roles are in Pakistan today.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the interview design has three sections. The purpose of the introductory section is to set the tone for the in-depth section by discussing the topic in general and making sure that the participant feels at ease and encouraged to give their perspective. The questions in this section were easy, generic, and did not require much elaboration, such as, "Can you tell me a little about yourself and your educational background?" and "How would you describe gender norms in Pakistan?". The in-depth section explored the research focus, and it was in this section that the respondents were asked about the main discussion points. For example, one of the questions in this section was "How do you think traditional expectations from women impact their work/life balance?". This section also had follow-up questions that were asked by the interviewer in-response to the answers being given by the respondent. These questions allowed the respondents to elaborate on their opinions and answers, about how gender roles shape the experience of decision-making process to enter the labour market in Pakistan, which was the key point of discussion in this study. Finally, the purpose of the concluding section was to clarify anything regarding the topics discussed or the interview itself, and to see if the respondents had any insights that they would like to offer that might not have been asked by the interviewer, such as, "Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important for understanding how gender norms influence women's decisions about working?".

The interviews were conducted online via Zoom, as this was deemed to be the most efficient way of interviewing respondents that reside in different cities of Pakistan. The language used was a combination of English, which is the official language of education in most private universities in larger cities of Pakistan, and Urdu, which is the national language of the country. This mix of Urdu and English is not uncommon amongst students in Pakistan, especially the ones with higher education (Ashraf, 2023).

All participants were provided with an overview of the study, and their consent was confirmed prior to the beginning of the interview. To maintain confidentiality, participant numbers are used in place of real names (See Table 2) throughout this study.

3.5. Data Analysis

There are many studies that have elaborated on how thematic analysis is the most suitable for exploratory studies, where the aim is to identify and interpret patterns in participants' views, experiences, and values (Braun & Clarke, 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Alhojailan, 2012). Since this is an exploratory study, and since the interview design focuses on respondents' opinions, experiences, and values, thematic analysis was deemed to be the most suitable method for analysing the collected data. Thematic analysis can be defined as "a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs or explanatory principles" (Lapadat, 2010, p. 926). According to Boyatzis (1998) thematic analysis not only organizes and describes the data qualitative data collected in high detail, but it also allows researchers to interpret various aspects of the research topic at hand, making it ideal for this study. The process of the thematic analysis for this study follows the widely followed and extensively cited 6-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which provides a systematic approach ensuring rigor and depth to the process of the analysis. An outline of the 6 phases is as follows:

The purpose of the first phase is to transcribe the data, familiarize the researcher with their data, and noting down initial ideas. This process ensures that the researcher becomes immersed in the data and begins recognizing potential patterns. As Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested, it is important that the researcher spends time by thoroughly reading and re-reading the data collecting. Transcription itself is considered an essential step in qualitative analysis, as it requires careful attention to detail to maintain the accuracy and context of the responses (Bird, 2005; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). In this study, the interviews were taken in a mix between Urdu and English languages, but the transcripts were written in English by manually translating the Urdu parts, so as to keep the consistency of language through the whole study.

In the second phase, the researcher systematically codes interesting parts of the data and organizes all relevant information under each code. Codes represent the smallest meaningful units of analysis, that capture important aspects related to the research question (Boyatzis, 1998). Coding is an

iterative process that involves organizing the data into meaningful groups, forming the foundation for later theme development (Tuckett, 2005). It is advised that at this stage the researcher should identify codes and match them with relevant data extracts, while also ensuring that all relevant extracts are coded and properly grouped under each code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The approach taken for this study followed these guidelines. The process of coding started after the transcripts were completed and uploaded in NVivo. Small, meaningful chunks of data started appearing throughout the transcripts, that directly or indirectly touched upon the lived experiences of the respondents, formed by the traditions, norms, or culture in Pakistan. The transcripts were coded one by one, starting from the first respondent, and previously coded transcripts would be revisited if the current transcript being coded allowed any new codes to emerge, so as to keep the consistency of codes between all transcripts.

The third phase focuses on the search for themes by gathering all data that is found to be relevant to each potential theme. This phase starts when the researcher has coded and organized all the data, and a long list of different codes has been identified. This phase moves beyond isolated codes to analyse how different aspects of the data relate to each other. Braun and Clarke (2006) advised that researchers should consider multiple interpretations while keeping an open mind about the themes that might emerge. The same strategy was followed in this study. The codes that were identified started to show connections and relations to each other, and similarities between their contexts started becoming visible. This allowed the researcher to assign the codes under different themes.

The fourth phase focuses on refining candidate themes that were selected in the previous phase. Some might be discarded due to insufficient or inconsistent data, while others might merge or split into separate themes. This phase involves two levels of review: first, assessing whether data within each theme forms a consistent pattern; and second, evaluating how well the themes represent the dataset as a whole. At this stage, the researcher should check for any missed data that should be coded. This should be repeated until the researcher believes that the coding and themes are completely coherent. At the end of this phase, the researcher should have a clear understanding of the themes, how they connect, and the overall narrative they reveal about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study took a similar approach. The data within each theme was reviewed to confirm consistent patterns were forming, followed by an evaluation of how well the themes were representing the dataset as a whole. This process was repeated multiple times to ensure that the codes and the themes were completely clear, and that their relations to the overall narrative made sense.

The goal of the fifth phase is to define and name the themes by analysing each theme and the overall story they convey, leading to clear and precise definitions and names for each one of the themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) advised at this phase to avoid making themes too broad or complex. During this process, the researcher also determines if any themes contain sub-themes, which are smaller themes within the main ones. Sub-themes help structure complex themes and highlight different layers of meaning within the data. It is important that by the end of this phase, the researcher has defined clearly what the themes are and what they are not (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For this study, the emergence of sub-themes became clear in this phase. The main themes that were finalized in the previous phase, although clear on their narrative, had become too broad and complex. Five sub-themes were introduced in total, 3 of them fell under the first main theme and 2 of them fell under the second main theme. The sub-themes that emerged were distinct enough from each other to be considered separate sub-themes but also had a clear narrative for their respective parent themes.

Finally, the last phase represents the final stage of the analysis where the researcher selects compelling data extracts, conducts a final review of these extracts, and connects their findings to the research question and existing literature. The goal here is to present a well-structured and scholarly report of the analysis. The goal of the write-up is to present a clear and compelling narrative the themes and validity of the analysis. The researcher has to make sure that the report written is coherent, logical, engaging and effectively conveys the story within and across the themes without repetition (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This suggested approach is also the one that was taken in this study. As the interviews were very in-depth, numerous compelling data extracts were selected, that either directly or indirectly connected the findings to the research question and existing literature. These findings will be discussed extensively in the following section.

4. Findings

This section will shed light on the findings, the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data.

While going through the codes that were made into the transcripts of all 17 interviews, two clear major themes starting emerging - the first theme captures how gender norms within the family and society shape women's attitudes, opportunities, and constraints before and during entry in the labour market in Pakistan; and the second theme reflects how gender norms are reproduced and create challenges in the workplace, shaping women's career trajectories, opportunities, and lived experiences. This structure mirrors the two-part research question, ensuring that each theme directly addresses either women's decision-making around the labour market entry or their lived experiences once employed.

These two main themes include five sub-themes in total, which will be discussed and elaborated on in this section, followed by how each of the sub-themes contribute to answering both parts of the research question.

4.1. Theme 1: Familial and Societal Influences on Women's Career Decisions

The first main theme that emerged from the codes sheds light on how gender norms within the family and society shape women's ideologies, attitudes, opportunities, and constraints before they entered the labour market, and during their entry into the labour market in Pakistan.

Three sub-themes emerged under the umbrella of the first main theme of family and societal influences, namely – Influence of family and society; Cultural expectations of women's roles; and, Women's personal ambitions and aspirations. The following sub-sections will shed light into these three sub-themes, using direct quotations from the respondents in this study, and will then be linked back to the research question, which is "How do gender norms shape the experiences of women with higher education in their decision to enter the labour market, and their experiences at the workplace, in Pakistan?". This main theme however, would focus on answering the first part of the research question, which focuses on the experiences of women before and during the entry into the labour force.

4.1.1. Sub-theme 1.1: Influence of family and society

Family members, especially immediate family, predominantly the parents, have shown to play one of the biggest roles in shaping the participants' professional life paths. This sub-theme includes: expectations from immediate family, community, extended family, family's attitude about education and work, and the idea of "women-centric" jobs in Pakistan.

Several participants highlighted how the societal norms around them directly shaped their career paths. For instance, one respondent mentioned how all of their female friends have always been empowered to work, to do big things, to get out of their houses to contribute to the world, she said "All of my friends, women, are very empowered, very, very empowered to work, all of them doing really great stuff, big things, getting out of the house, contributing to the world." (Participant 03). Another participant gave a similar opinion, of how her local community was progressive, which made the idea of working women more accepted, she explained "I think maybe in the people that we grew up around, my society and the Air Force, it was very progressive, and so for us it [the concept of working women] wasn't that out of the norm." (Participant 02). These accounts highlighted by the respondents show how big of an impact a positive outlook on women empowerment can have on women when they are deciding to enter the labour market in Pakistan. On the contrary, one participant discussed how she was discouraged to work because of family pressure, as she knew how traditional wives are more easily accepted by potential in-laws. She mentioned "Working was sort of discouraged in my house, probably because of societal pressure, they [her family] know traditional wives will be more easily accepted by their families." (Participant 08). This is a clear indication of how expectations from families, or potential in-laws can have a negative impact on women's ambitions to work and participate in the labour market. One participant, whose family owns and runs their own business, explained how her distant relatives couldn't grasp the idea of her wanting to have her own job, instead of working at her family's business. She said:

> My relatives had a few things to say. Especially because we have our own business. I got to hear a lot from my relatives. That if you have your own business, why do you even need to work somewhere else? You know, like in a derogatory way. Because, the people who live closer to me. They're my maternal family. And they're a little conservative. And it's not the norm over there, that women work. (Participant 09).

This goes to show that people in the Pakistani society tend to not grasp the concept of women wanting to have their own career, women working is almost exclusively seen as a financial need, and not as a personal ambition. Another participant explained how the expectations, and

traditional ideologies of social circles or extended family of her parents had a negative impact on what her parents thought about women working, she said:

> I think it's the people around you. It's really hard to hold your ground when people continuously keep knocking on your door and saying what you're doing is wrong. And that's one of the reasons I think my family values have changed so much over the years. (Participant 14).

This sheds light on how, even families who have relatively more egalitarian opinions about women working, can feel pressurized when living in a community that has more traditional expectations from women.

Seven out of the total seventeen participants highlighted how their family's attitudes about women getting educated played a part in their entry into the professional world. One participant discussed how her father has been very encouraging of empowering his daughters to get educated, and has helped them explore different careers, she explained:

> While we were growing up, our dad was like very much into empowering us with education and making us, like helping us in exploring everything and anything to make, to help us become what we are today, sort of. We have moved on to a much more open-minded liberal setup over the years. (Participant 10).

A different participant shared something similar, how growing up and being around working women, her mother, her aunts, had a very positive influence, making their entry into the labour market easier. She said:

> I think my experience was commonplace because most of the people I was around, as well as my own family, in my family, my mother was a working woman. She worked for about 35 years. My grandmother, was also a working woman. Not that common in my father's side of the family. But for my mother's side of the family, most of the women have been working and have always been encouraged to pursue their education and work later as well. So it wasn't that common in my father's side of the family. But even then, most of my cousins are educated. Some of them went on to do their businesses. Very few of them went on for jobs. (Participant 13).

This goes to show how relatively easy it can make for young aspiring women of Pakistan to enter the labour market if they are already surrounded by working women. On the flip side however, there were also instances when extended family or in-laws are expecting daughters-in-law that would not be entering the labour market, just because they themselves do not have any working

woman in the family. One respondent said: "They were more traditional, for them it was normal that women don't work. Their lives were just kitty parties, just enjoying and having no stress about life. They did study, they just never worked." (Participant 08).

Most of the participants also discussed how, even though their families were open to the idea of women working, they were more open to it if they were pursuing more "women-centric" jobs, like HR or teaching for instance. One participant, who has been working in HR for two years, mentioned that the idea of "women-centric jobs" is widely accepted by almost everybody in Pakistan, and that these sort of jobs are somehow considered easier for women to do and manage, she explained:

Because I think it's ingrained in our minds, you know, this is how it is and that's how it's always going to be. And these are male centric jobs and you cant get into that. I think generally there's like this idea that is accepted widely by almost everybody, that there's certain jobs that are considered easier for women. I've seen that people are always like HR is a woman-centric role because you need empathy and it's difficult for men to be that way. (Participant 02).

One participant, who is an engineer by profession, disclosed that she has been told numerous times, how engineering is for men, not women, and that she should pursue a career that requires care and nourishment (Participant 17). Instances like these show us how deeply the idea of 'women-centric jobs' is ingrained in the Pakistani society.

This sub-theme reveals just how big of an influence family and society can have on women's decisions to enter the labour market. The influences were not necessarily negative, there were several instances, as revealed earlier in this section, of participants highlighting how their parents' belief in the importance of female education, and female autonomy, had a lasting positive effect on their desire to make a career for themselves. On the flip side, the quotations highlighted in this sub-section earlier also shed light on the negative influence that communities and extended families can have on women's aspirations. These contrasting experiences suggest that women's career decisions are often negotiated within the boundaries of family expectations, which can either open or close pathways into the labour market. In conclusion, this sub-section, using the information provided by the participants of this study, answers how expectations of family and society influence women's decision to enter the labour market in Pakistan.

4.1.2. Sub-theme 1.2: Cultural expectations of women's roles

The cultural expectations from women, both professionally and at home, emerged as a clear sub-theme under the main theme of how family and society shape a woman's thinking, and/or create barriers from entering the labour force in Pakistan. This sub-theme includes: expectation of doing all/majority of household labour as a woman; the expectation to prioritize family and traditional household duties over career and personal ambitions; general discrimination and/or favouritism against daughters as opposed to sons; practical or logistical issues for women; and internalized beliefs of family and society.

All seventeen participants contributed to this theme in one way or another. The idea that stood out the most in the interviews, was the expectation from women that they would be doing the majority, or all of the household chores, whether or not they're working. This is an expectations that each one of the respondents mentioned, usually highlighting it multiple times at different instances. The first participant highlighted how, even though all of the women from her immediate and extended family participate in the labour force, they all also end up doing all of all or majority of the household chores. To said "If I talk about all the women in my family, yes, they all have their own jobs but they also do all the household chores." (Respondent 01). She also went on to mention how the inequal expected division of household chores discourages her to get married eventually. Another participant said that these inequal division of household chores is ingrained in the society's heads, and that women are being brought up in a way, that if they don't do household chores after coming back from work, there's a sense of guilt that gets involved. She said:

> I think these gender roles, are also so ingrained, so deeply entrenched. They are in our DNA at this point. They are in our DNA, like, as a woman, if I come home, there's a sense of guilt, that's involved. Like, I feel like I haven't done anything since the morning. (Participant 03).

A lot of the participants mentioned how Pakistani women are working 'double shifts'. One participant mentioned "Women are usually working double shifts as I like to say, in the morning they work at their workplace, as in the job, and then they come back and have to do all the household chores." (Participant 12). Instances such as these in the lives of Pakistani women highlight just how stagnant the expectations have become from women, especially this concept of inequal division of household chores. An example by another participant further cements the existence of this expectation, she mentioned how a married friend of hers always has to remind her husband that he is also responsible for the household work, not just her. Even though he's more open to helping out, and eventually does help out, but the fact is that he does not expect

himself to participate. She explained "Even though her husband is open to doing household chores, he has to be reminded about it everyday and it can become super annoying. It shouldn't have to be a reminder everyday." (Participant 13).

Most of these participants also emphasized on the expectation from them to prioritise their household chores instead of their jobs. One participant said:

> And I think because socially, the woman is expected to raise, like her whole family and, you know, give up her career so that her husband can work and all that, and no man is ever expected to do that. (Participant 02).

This means, in her opinion, the woman is expected to raise the whole family, take care of the house, and is expected to give up her career, so that the husband can focus on his job and earning, while this sacrifice is not expected to be made by the man. Another participant, who runs her own make-up parlour in her house and was planning to open a shop, discussed how she has to put a pause on her business because as she would be getting married soon, and it was expected from her, not the husband-to-be, that she would be moving to live in with him, and relocating her business would have been out of the question. She said:

> My parents are going to get me married in the next few years and it's expected of me that I'd be moving to wherever the guy would be situated in. Because we know for sure that it would me changing my life, me going to his place or whatever as opposed to him leaving his life and moving in with me, you know, this is always expected from the woman, so that's how gender norms and the expectations from women after getting married is affecting my professional journey. (Participant 09).

These highlighted instances shed light on how, in the Pakistani society, it is always women that are expected to forgo their careers and to focus on the work within the households.

More than half of the respondents also mentioned some sort of general discrimination against daughters as opposed to sons. A respondent mentioned how her brother was expected to eventually run their family business, and not her or her sister, because "*that's always the brother's place*" (Respondent 06).

Another instance of general discriminatory culture was explained by a participant, she said "Also, for some reason, the previous generation really wants their sons to be successful, like they're not open to the idea of their daughters being more successful for some reason.". (Participant 12). Which goes to show the older generation in Pakistan wants their sons to be more successful than their daughters, as traditionally, men are considered to be the breadwinners.

A participant mentioned how she had to forgo a promising professional opportunity just because it was a little out of city, she said "mobility is a big problem for girls, it wouldn't have been possible for me to safely go there every day, although I don't think it was that big of a deal" (Participant 03). Another participant went into more detail to explain these practical/logistical restrictions on women, she explained:

> There's going to be some restriction from your house, that you can't be late, you're going to be late, you have a lot of work, and all of that. I feel like that kind of holds back for women to actually, you know, unlocking their full potential and how far they can go. (Participant 07).

The same participant also explained how fancier offices are seen as more acceptable for women, she said:

> It means a lot to my family and the environment that I live in is, girls work in good offices. So, I think that preconceived notion of how a working environment for a woman should be like, it's a big barrier into where to apply, what to do, stuff like that. (Participant 03).

These accounts shared by the participants, highlight how gender norms and societal expectations create barriers for women to enter the labour market, and how they are very strongly expected to be in charge of the household duties, and prioritize them over their personal professional ambitions. The expectation of 'double-shift' not only discourages women from pursuing professional opportunities, but also undervalues their professional contributions. The strongly normalized role of women as the primary caretaker of the house and household chores, significantly restrict women's agency and career progression. Lastly, the practical and logistical barriers that were mentioned by numerous participants highlight another barrier that significantly restricts women's entry into the labour force. In conclusion, the accounts in this sub-section highlight how the traditional gender norms in Pakistan have strong negative influence on women's career prospects, which links back to the research question's part about gender norms shaping women's entry into the labour market.

4.1.3: Sub-theme 1.3: Women's personal ambitions and aspirations

Interestingly, alongside accounts and instances of restrictions and barriers taking place before and during the entry into labour force, many participants emphasized how their personal ambitions had a positive influence, and acted as a driving force in navigating the barriers discussed in the

previous sub-themes. This sub-theme includes: Desire for personal identity, and; Desire to have financial independence.

On the flip side to most of the discouragements and barriers for women discussed in the previous two sub-sections, a prominent sub-theme emerged of women having strong personal ambitions, in spite of facing numerous instances of discriminations and barriers to enter the labour force. A respondent mentioned how the desire to use their education and make a career out of her life, instead of being a housewife, was a strong motivation for her (Respondent 08). Another participant mentioned how growing up, she saw the importance of having financial independence, and to have the security of not depending on someone else, became a motivation for her to have her own career (Participant 01). Another person mentioned how going out of the house everyday to work, and having a professional career felt very gratifying for her (Participant 13).

The instances shared in this sub-section illustrate an interesting picture, that while gender norms in Pakistan often impose restrictions, they can also spark resilience in the form of personal ambitions, as highlighted by the participants in this study. The desire for financial independence, and the desire to have their own professional identity, has the potential to both motivate women to pursue their own careers, and respond to the barriers created by societal expectations. Therefore, this sub-section goes to show the existence of an important dimension to the original research question, that women's decision to enter the labour market are not solely determined by external factors but can also be shaped by personal ambitions.

4.2. Theme 2: Workplace Experiences of Educated Women

The second main theme that emerged from the codes focuses on how traditional norms create barriers at the workplace. Two sub-themes were observed to emerge that fell under this main theme of the barriers and discriminations faced in the workplace as a woman, namely – Discriminatory practices at the workplace; Cultural and social barriers at the workplace. The following sub-sections will elaborate on these two sub-themes by using direct quotations from the respondents in this study, and will then be linked back to the second part of the research question, which is how gender norms shape women's experiences at the workplace in Pakistan.

4.2.1. Sub-theme 2.1: Discriminatory practices at the workplace

Expectedly, the barriers and discrimination women generally face in Pakistan, also very much exist at the workplace, and are integrated into the work culture across the country. However, this sub-theme does not include social and practical barriers, as it is broad enough to be a sub-theme on its own.

This sub-theme includes: Being viewed as inferior or not being taken seriously; General preference for men in the workplace; Hostility or inappropriate behaviour by male figures at the workplace; Lower salaries, support & benefits as opposed to male colleagues, and; Slower career growth as opposed to male employees. Barriers and discrimination at the workplace is another one of the very few problems that was highlighted by all seventeen respondents in one way or another, and on more than one occasion for most of these respondents.

Multiple respondents emphasized how men at the workplace see women as inferior to them. One respondent mentioned how she can always witness discrimination, and how they are always doubting her capabilities just because she's a woman (Respondent 01). Another respondent, who worked as a doctor, mentioned how patients would prefer to speak to male nurses, instead of female doctors, just because they would view the men as more capable and reliable. She said "I've experiences, that sometimes, even male nurses are seen as better doctors, than actual [female] doctors, just because they're women" (Participant 11).

Many respondents also mentioned how there is much less support for women at the workplace. Men are seen as the breadwinners of the families, so that forms an excuse for them to be promoted faster or be given better increments, even though there are female employees in the company who also have families, but in Pakistan, they are not viewed as the traditional breadwinner. One participants explained:

> There are companies where there is an equal pay scale, but there are also small companies, where the boss decides your pay or increment based on his mood. They think, because she's not the one earning money to run her home, she doesn't need the money as much, so he'd rather give the increment to a male employee, even if the female employee works significantly better. (Participant 09).

Most of the participants also highlighted hostile and inappropriate behaviour by male figures at the workplace is not uncommon, and that forms a kind of discouragement towards the idea of working as a woman in Pakistan. One participant mentioned how the office environment, in general, is not safe, she said "the office environment, for females, is not that good. Inappropriate

moves, be it verbal or physical are also not that uncommon." (Participant 05). Slower career growth was something that came up quite often in the interviews, and was discussed extensively by some of the participants. One participant gave a very in-depth explanation, she said:

> If there's growth for one of us, it's probably going to be the man, and so his title will change, his salary will change, and so when he has to switch jobs, it doesn't just matter if I did most of the work in this office, when he has to switch his job, even though he does less work than me, his title is higher than me, his salary is higher than me, he'll get a better position than me, even though he worked far less than me, I won't have as high of a title nor will I be able to set the money for myself because I will have a lower salary, so 10 years from now he'll be way ahead of me, as a fact I know that he'll be ahead of me no matter how much I work because they'll never realistically appreciate me in terms of a promotion or a raise so it's not going to matter how much I work here unfortunately. (Participant 01).

The accounts highlighted in this sub-section reveal the existence of strong barriers and frequent gender discrimination, and the kind of impact they can have on women's experiences at the workplace, and on their career progressions. These instances of inequal pay, slower career progression, hostile male colleagues, being viewed as less competent, highlight how workplace becomes another place where gender norms shape women's professional lives in Pakistan. These findings can be linked back to the research question, as they reveal how barriers and discriminations that exist because of traditional gender norms at the workplace can have significant negative influences on women's professional experiences and career progressions.

4.2.2: Sub-theme 2.2: Cultural and social barriers at the workplace

The traditional cultural norms in Pakistan have influence over the majority of different parts of the Pakistani society, which means that these norms also erect barriers for women within the workplace. This sub-theme focuses strictly on the barriers that women face as a direct result of the general traditional culture in Pakistan. This sub-theme includes: Cultural, social, and religious restrictions on women; Discouragements faced within the workplace for doing masculine roles; Discouraging female autonomy, and; Preference for women that are unmarried and don't have children.

As same sex friendships are much more accepted, and opposite sex friendships are relatively frowned upon, one interesting thing that came up quite regularly in the interviews was how easier

it is for men to pitch themselves to other men who are at a higher position at the company. One participant said:

> This occurrence of a cigarette break, in an office culture, men would step out, the ice is very easily broken between seniors and juniors, they can have this platform, where they can sell themselves in a more informal way, make their image more uplifted. (Participant 03).

And because women smoking is still frowned upon in most of the country, it forms an invisible barrier for women's career progression. Another participant explained:

> They [men] can go on smoke breaks and just pitch themselves. We [women] cannot do that, right? Even if I smoke, I will not go on a smoke break because I don't want to, that would be like something so taboo in Pakistan, people would be like "Oh my God, she went on a smoke break" which is so wrong. (Participant 10).

These cultural expectations of same sex bonding go beyond just smoke breaks, they usually become a part of the everyday culture in offices in Pakistan. One participant said:

> And if your manager is only talking to your male co-workers, and only having lunch with him, and so when the time for the promotion comes, you're probably not going to be the one being chosen. (Participant 16).

This explanation links back to another barrier previously discussed, about slower career progression, and contributes to the larger theme of gender norms shaping workplace experience in Pakistan. One participant, who is working as an engineer, shared multiple instances where she would feel discrimination as an employee, just because she's working in a "masculine role" as an engineer (Participant 17).

The examples discussed by the participants in this sub-section shed light on an interesting theme, of how cultural norms in Pakistan, especially that have a negative connotation attached to opposite sex friendships or acquaintances, directly shape women's professional experiences by limiting opportunities because of their gender. The traditional ideas of "appropriate" social networking erects barriers for women, especially in male-dominated workplaces, that makes it harder for women to build effective networks for career progression, strongly limit women's access to opportunities that men in general have easy access to. Overall, this sub-section sheds light on how traditional cultural norms can create social barriers at the workplace. This contributes to answering the research question as it shows that social barriers created by traditional gender norms, play a

fundamental role in shaping women's experiences at the workplace, which was the second part of the research question.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In this dissertation, the influence of traditional gender norms was explored, both on women's decision to enter the labour market, and on their experiences at the workplace, in Pakistan. As this was an exploratory study, the purpose was to get in-depth insights from educated Pakistani women, using a primary research method.

In order to get a better understanding on the influence of gender norms on women in general, a review of the existing literature was made, focusing on the global situation, narrowing down to South Asia, and finally narrowing down even further to explore the literature specific to Pakistan. This allowed the dissertation to start with a relative context, about the differences in gender norms and expectations from women in the West, in South Asia, and in Pakistan. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted, followed by a thematic analysis of the data collected.

Due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews, each of the participants had slightly different experiences and opinions to share. Nonetheless, clear themes started to emerge when going through the transcripts of the 17 interviews that were conducted. In total, 5 sub-themes emerged from the interviews, namely: Influence of family and society; Cultural expectations of women's roles; Women's personal ambitions and aspirations; Discriminatory practices at the workplace; Cultural and social barriers at the workplace. The themes were divided under two main themes, ones who emerged when women were discussing their experiences before entering the labour force, and the ones that emerged when the participants were discussing their experiences at the workplace. As the research question in this study was a two-parter, the first focused on women's experiences before and during their entry into the labour market, and the second focused on their experiences at the workplace; each of the themes answers either of the two parts of the research question.

The three sub-themes under the first main theme of family and societal influences (Influence of family and society; Cultural expectations of women's roles; Women's personal ambitions and aspirations) were found to answer the first part of the research question, which was "How do gender norms shape the experiences of women with higher education in their decision to enter the labour market?". As anticipated, all of the 17 participants acknowledged the significant influence of family and society on their decision to work, which was either positive or negative, depending on each participant's circumstances. Participants that had a positive influence from family and society, usually belonged to families where women having their own careers was the norm and was

seen as the 'normal' path, and families that are more egalitarian values in the house. On the flip side, participants that had a negative influence from family and society, usually belonged to households where more traditional values were the norm, and where being a working woman carried a negative connotation. All of the 17 participants also acknowledged the significant influence of cultural expectations of women's roles, which was mostly negative for all of the respondents. All of them discussed the expectation from them of being the primary caretaker, the expectation of them having the responsibility of majority, if not all, of the household chores, and the expectation of them prioritizing their household duties more than their own careers, something that is not expected from men as most of them shared. This aligns with existing literature that discussed gender roles and their influence on life prospects for women in urban Karachi, a major city in the south of Pakistan (Ali et al., 2011). 12 of the 17 participants discussed the importance of their personal ambitions to have their own professional identity and/or to have financial independence. Interestingly, for the participants that shed light on their personal ambitions, they were usually formed as a result of seeing some sort of, even if not significant, abuse in the general society, or in their own social circles.

The two sub-themes under the second main theme (Discriminatory practices at the workplace; Cultural and social barriers at the workplace) were found to answer the second part of the research question, which was "How gender norms influence their experiences at the workplace?". Unsurprisingly, all 17 participants acknowledged facing some sort of discriminatory practices in their experience of working in Pakistan. Most of them mentioned hostile behaviour from male figures at their workplace, be it speaking with women in a derogatory way, or generally viewing women as inferior to men. Most of the participants also highlighted the gender discrimination that exists when it comes to the salaries, benefits, and support they receive, as opposed to their male colleagues. The different kinds of gender discriminations that were revealed in this study align with previous literature that shed light on gender discrimination faced by women at the workplace in the education sector of Pakistan (Mian et al., 2016). 15 of the 17 participants highlighted how culture and social barriers have impacted their professional journey. Interestingly, the concept of "cigarette breaks" was brought up quite often. As is the case in most of the world, Pakistanis have also adopted the habit of taking smoke breaks during work, especially lunch. But because culturally it is considered taboo for a woman to smoke in Pakistan, as also discussed by Shaikh (2012), most of the participants in this study have never participated in this tradition, at least while being in Pakistan. Along with the cultural barrier, where being friends with the opposite sex is also frowned upon in Pakistan, these cultural and social barriers restrict women's access to an informal setting, where men on the other hand, can socialize amongst themselves, build networks, and be able to

pitch themselves in front of their bosses or higher ups.The two sub-themes under the second main theme (Discriminatory practices at the workplace; Cultural and social barriers at the workplace) were found to answer the second part of the research question, which was "How gender norms influence their experiences at the workplace?". Unsurprisingly, all 17 participants acknowledged facing some sort of discriminatory practices in their experience of working in Pakistan. Most of them mentioned hostile behaviour from male figures at their workplace, be it speaking with women in a derogatory way, or generally viewing women as inferior to men. Most of the participants also highlighted the gender discrimination that exists when it comes to the salaries, benefits, and support they receive, as opposed to their male colleagues. The different kinds of gender discriminations that were revealed in this study align with previous literature that shed light on gender discrimination faced by women at the workplace in the education sector of Pakistan (Mian et al., 2016). 15 of the 17 participants highlighted how culture and social barriers have impacted their professional journey. Interestingly, the concept of "cigarette breaks" was brought up quite often. As is the case in most of the world, Pakistanis have also adopted the habit of taking smoke breaks during work, especially lunch. But because culturally it is considered taboo for a woman to smoke in Pakistan, as also discussed by Shaikh (2012), most of the participants in this study have never participated in this tradition, at least while being in Pakistan. Along with the cultural barrier, where being friends with the opposite sex is also frowned upon in Pakistan, these cultural and social barriers restrict women's access to an informal setting, where men on the other hand, can socialize amongst themselves, build networks, and be able to pitch themselves in front of their bosses or higher ups.

6. Contributions

Although, the previous research in this area has explored the role of gender norms in influencing labour market outcomes globally, and in South Asia, such as Chuanchuan and Jingwen (2021) and Pareek and Bagrecha (2017), there remains limited empirical evidence on how these norms operate specifically in the context of Pakistan. Existing studies, such as Ejaz (2011), have predominantly focused on macroeconomic trends and used the in-depth understanding of these behaviours, leaving a gap in qualitative understanding. This study fills this gap in the literature by providing deeper, subjective insights into how gender norms shape individual level decisions regarding women's employment, how they impact their personal experiences at the workplace, and how they influence their career growth. Studies like Corrigall and Konrad (2007), that have focused on gender role attitudes and careers, have discussed these norms as barriers in a broad sense. This study complements such literature by looking at how these norms operate at different stages in women's lives, therefore this study has given a more nuanced understanding of the influence of gender norms on employment and careers.

This research extends and applies Akerlof and Kranton's (2000) identity economics framework, which demonstrates that economic decisions are shaped not only by financial incentives but also by social norms and personal identity, to a cultural setting where gender roles are less egalitarian as compared to the more developed regions of the world (Bussolo et al., 2024). By examining the psychological aspects associated with women having to face traditional gender norms, this study enhances our understanding of how identity-based norms influence economic behaviour. Unlike most prior studies that have relied on labour force surveys and quantitative assessments, such as Setyonaluri and Shirota (2019) and Corrigal and Konrad (2007), this research applied an in-depth qualitative approach through semi-structured interviews, which resulted in rich and complex themes. This methodological method allowed for a deeper exploration of personal experiences, perceptions, and societal pressures that influence women's employment decisions and their experiences within workplaces. Therefore, by researching perspectives that are often excluded in large-scale surveys, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers to FLFP (female labour force participation) in Pakistan.

Much of the existing literature, such as Ahmed and Sen (2018), focuses on uneducated or rural women. As this study focused on women with higher education, it demonstrated how even privilege and education does not completely eradicate barriers for employment, adding another perspective into the existing literature. Overall, the majority of the studies conducted on similar topics focus on more developed countries, or they focus on big developing countries. Therefore,

this study expands the overall literature by focusing on a small developing country in South Asia. This opens the door for Pakistan-specific insights that can be compared with other developing countries facing similar gendered constraints.

The findings from this study have significant implications for policymakers, NGOs and employers working towards increasing women's participation in the workforce, especially in the Pakistani and South Asian context. This research also highlighted the importance of addressing deeply embedded gender norms and cultural expectations that continue to restrict women's labour market entry and hinders professional growth. It also highlighted the significance of addressing gender norms rather than solely focusing on economic incentives by identifying cultural and social factors that hinder female labour force participation (FLFP). In summary, the study contributes to the existing academic literature by providing a nuanced account of how gender norms affect women with higher education, a demographic often assumed to be less constrained by such barriers, as well as offering insights into deeper issues regarding gender expectations in Pakistan. On the other hand, the study also contributes at a more practical level by offering valuable insights for designing targeted interventions, workplace policies, and awareness campaigns.

7. Limitations and future research

One of the limitations that should be pointed out and acknowledged in this study is the fact that almost all the participants that took part in the interviews belonged to 'privileged' or middle-class and upper-class socio-economic groups within Pakistan. Naturally, people belonging from these groups tend to have a relatively more egalitarian outlook on life in general, including gender norms and expectations from women. This means that the perspectives shared by the respondents in this study about gender norms, gender discrimination, barriers in the household and at the workplace, etc., might not be entirely indicative of the overall situation in Pakistan.

The second limitation was the fact that all of the participants in this study, although based in different cities and provinces, grew up and lived in urban areas of Pakistan. Women in rural areas, and/or in more conservative provinces, may face stronger cultural and social barriers than the ones in this study, as shared by Ahmed and Sen (2018) about the situation in Bangladesh. This limitation also results in a more skewed outlook in the Pakistani society, similar to the one discussed in the first limitation. In addition, another point that might have resulted in a similar skewness, would be the focus on the experiences of women with higher education. For practical and logistical reasons, this study excluded women with little or no formal education. While this was aligned with the research question, it does mean that the findings cannot be generalized to the wider female population of Pakistan.

This research delved into the women's experiences and perspectives of growing up and working in a country with traditional gender norms. Out of the total 17 participants, 15 of them were working as employees in someone else's company. Participant 06, who started her own company from scratch, and was running her business as the CEO, gave quite interesting and contrasting insights about working women and their productivity, as compared to men, from the employers point of view. She explained how she, although actively seeks to hire women, has observed that cultural and family pressures, such as restrictions from in-laws, often significantly affect productivity and lead to difficult management decisions (Participant 06). She also went on to acknowledge that she's asked her hiring team to discreetly consider marital status of female candidates when hiring, as she observed that married women face additional family-related responsibilities without communicating, that can limit their ability to fully engage at work, and which eventually can cost hinderance in the company's cashflow. As diving deeply into the employers' perspectives was not a part of this study, future studies could therefore explore employer's perspectives in greater depth, both to understand the structural barriers women face,

and to identify potential organizational strategies for creating more sustainable, supporting workplaces.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Design

1. Introduction & Background

- Can you please introduce yourself and tell me a little about your educational background and professional journey so far?

2. Decision-Making Process

- Growing up, what kind of exposure did you have to working women? How did your family and community view women working?
- How did you personally arrive at the decision to work (or not work)?
- What factors influenced this decision, for example, family expectations, cultural or gender norms, or personal ambitions?

3. Conflicts & Barriers

- Have you ever felt pressure, anxiety, or conflict about your decision to work (or not work)?
- Can you describe what those conflicts looked like? How did they affect you emotionally, and how did they shape your final decision?

4. Societal Expectations & Gender Norms

- What are your views on the dominant gender roles and expectations for women in Pakistan today?
- From your perspective, have you noticed any shifts or changes in these norms over the years?

5. Balancing Work & Household Responsibilities

- In your experience, how are working women expected to balance professional responsibilities with household or family duties?
- Do you feel certain types of jobs are considered more "appropriate" for women in this context?

6. Future Expectations & Career Progression

- What are your expectations about staying in the labor market after marriage or having children?
- How do you think working in male-dominated workplaces might affect women's experiences and opportunities for career growth?

7. Wrapping Up

- Is there anything we haven't discussed that you think is important or relevant to this topic?