

Women's Unpaid Care Work in Urban Pakistan during COVID-19: Awakening Women's Agency?

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Abstract

This research records, highlights, and analyzes the experiences of women's unpaid care work during the pandemic of Covid-19 in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Women's unpaid care work during Covid-19 occurs in a context where structural discrimination already persists: Women perform a disproportionate share of unpaid care work due to the gendered division of labor. This article addresses the gendered power ideologies underpinning familial relationships in Pakistan that were revealed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Both working women and housewives were obligated to take on additional household responsibilities, constantly switching between roles (mother, housewife, daughter-in-law, employee) to cater for the needs of the family. Through the experiences of Pakistani women, this study shows how Covid-19 has served as an insightful journey for these women who amidst patriarchal ideologies developed an understanding of their individuality, identity, and their significance in this unpaid care work realm. The pandemic prompted them to reflect on their roles as care workers and instilled a sort of agency in them to negotiate, resist, redefine, and maneuver through their subordinated positions to feel empowered and happy. The study also contests the idea of homogeneity inherent in the women's experiences through the 20 narratives that it discusses with a special focus on the distinctiveness intertwined in the use of agency by these women. Hence, the article subtly explores subjective experiences and contextualizes the reflexive responses of these women during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key words

Agency, Covid-19, gendered division of work, subordination, unpaid care work

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Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak wreaked havoc across the world bringing it to a standstill and stirring unprecedented changes in societies and the global economy (Chauhan, 2020). The effects of the pandemic were felt differentially, exposing entrenched gender, racial, and class inequalities, (Ahmed, Ahmed, Pissarides, & Stiglitz, 2020) and hugely impacting vulnerable sections of society the world over (Boncori, 2020).

The pandemic instigated the debate on unpaid care work, the work in which women globally spend an average of 201 days annually compared to men's 63 (Addati, Cattaneo, Esquivel, & Valarino, 2018). While much research is already being conducted to explore the gendered impacts of pandemic worldwide (De Paz, Muller, Munoz Boudet, & Gaddis, 2020; McLaren, Wong, Nguyen, & Mahamadachchi, 2020), it is also important to highlight the experiences of women of color instead of using Western findings as a norm. In this context, this article explores the gendered dimension of unpaid care work during the pandemic in urban Pakistan. By carefully studying the experiences of working women and housewives in Pakistan, the article provides a comprehensive understanding of the intersecting effects of power hierarchies inherent in Pakistani society on women's self-definitions.

Women's unpaid care work in Pakistan is compounded by many socio-economic inequalities. Despite both men and women being at home during the initial lockdown, women took up most of the additional responsibilities. Tasks like cooking, cleaning, and washing that earlier could be performed by domestic help inevitably fell on housewives and working women. The closure of schools, social distancing, and remote schooling brought increased childcare responsibilities. These excessive care responsibilities prompted the respondents of this research to reflect upon the overall division of labor and their own identities. This consciousness of selfhood resulted in a non-transformative agency whereby women were seen to subtly exercise choice within the established patriarchal structure. We call it non-transformative because it lacked a desire to overthrow the patriarchal structure and co-existed with women's desire to conform to the prevalent religious identity of an ideal Muslim woman.

As a result, the research makes the argument that agency must be understood beyond the simplistic registers of patriarchy and submission. It shows how these respondents use the very instruments of their oppression as a means to assert their value both individually and collectively. The narrations reflect that even though ex-

plicit agentive behavior is absent, there are still subtle expressions and moments of resistance in women's behaviors that instead of making them victims made them active agents who constantly drew their identity from their care work and took self-guided actions in the framework of non-transformative agency to make their environment suitable.

Literature Review

Pre-existing literature on care work reflects an inherent conflict in conceptualizing and defining it as a discursive category (Rummery & Fine, 2012). Unpaid domestic labor was initially not considered sufficiently worthy to be included in the mainstream economy (Kuznets, 1948) and was devalued largely because it is done by women in the private domain of the household (Rao, 2018). Over the years, feminists challenged this exclusion and devaluation and by the late 1960s and early 1970s, the discourse concerning domestic and unpaid care work was formally termed a "domestic labor debate" (Rao, 2018). This debate questioned the normalization of seeing domestic labor as women's "natural obligation" along with its subsequent devaluation. Elson's (2017) triple "R" approach of recognition, reduction, and redistribution proved vital in incorporating unpaid labor into the economic praxis. Also, the inclusion of Sustainable Development Goal 5.4 which is "Unpaid Care Work and Domestic Work" in the 2030 Agenda helped in highlighting the gender inequalities inherent in unpaid care work (Narayan, 2017). Despite these efforts, women continue to constitute two-thirds of the portion of unpaid care work (Luxton, 2009).

The feminization of care work is a result of the gendered norms that define roles (Folbre, 2012; Klein, 2021). Owing to the societal understandings of appropriately defined roles for men and women, the work assigned to women structurally and normatively is positioned in a subordinate position compared to men's duties. Scholars have noted that women are seen as responsible for fixed and less flexible tasks such as cooking and cleaning while men involved in care tasks are likely to be seen doing less frequent, non-routinized work such as gardening or household maintenance (Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005; Quadlin & Doan, 2018). Bakker (2007) states that this gendered division of work inevitably generates distinct life purposes for men and women, confining women to the private realms, and men to the public sphere, thereby providing unequal access to socio-economic and educational resources. This all exhibits the gendered power ideologies at play within familial relationships (Alcoff & Potter, 1993) that not only maintains the

work status quo but also has serious effects on women's ability to realize their potential. These gendered patterns are also then seen to be transferred to the subsequent younger generations where they persist throughout adulthood (Dotti Sani, 2016); in many cases, these gendered hierarchies are reproduced by women themselves. Women in many cases resist assigning care responsibilities to men (Allen & Hawkins, 1999) hence forever relegating themselves to the unpaid care work cycle.

Covid-19 along with multiple other changes helped to (re)discover and (re)define the significance of women's unpaid care work. Women's massive contribution in the care work realm for both family and the community-at-large started to become visible during Covid-19 (Sarrasanti, Donkor, Santos, Tsagkari, & Wannous, 2020). The global imposition of lockdowns also restricted women's socio-economic opportunities due to the immense care duties they performed (De Paz et al., 2020). With women already doing three times more unpaid care work than men in the pre-pandemic context (Nations, 2020) the surge of coronavirus disease aggravated the situation, furthering gender inequalities in the division of work.

The Gendered Division of Care Work in Pakistani Society

The World Bank data reveal that Pakistani women spend an average of 10.5 times more time than men on unpaid domestic work (Tariq & Bibler, 2020). Apart from specific domestic chores, the onus of performing all the categories of "care work" such as overseeing children's education, rearing and parenting, and taking care of the sick within the household premises falls on women (Kirmani, 2020). In a context where women in Pakistan already have less time available to look after their overall well-being, the situation worsened during Covid-19. In the face of the closure of educational institutes during the Covid-19 lockdown, Pakistani women had to shoulder the additional burden of homeschooling, restricting their chances of any personal or professional growth, normalizing their additional burden as a part of their obligations, and also framing women within society's scripted gendered identity and roles (Kirmani, 2020). Owing to their disproportionate share of care work, the expectation to leave their paid employment also surfaced (Alon et al., 2020) hence posing a significant threat to any economic independence that women might have previously attained. Covid-19 thus provided an apt opportunity to study the long-term structural gender disparities inherent in Pakistani society and the pandemic's implications for the unpaid care work provided by women.

Methodology

Drawing on feminist perspectives, this qualitative study employed standpoint epistemology to analyze the lived experiences of a sample of 20 women from Abbottabad, a small city in Northern Pakistan. It attempted to unravel these women's subjective experiences of unpaid care work and its implications on their selfhood during Covid-19. By situating knowledge in women's experiences (Harding, 1986, 1987; Harstock, 1983), the particular usage of "standpoint" became an effective strategy to explore the powerful patriarchal dynamics at play within the household in the unusual lockdown context as well as challenge the androcentric nature of knowledge production (Del & Yancy, 2009).

Despite being a growing urban center, Abbottabad seemed rife with traditional gendered expectations with men and women following prescribed gender roles that relegated men to the public and women to the private sphere. In such a cultural setting it was interesting to explore how the pandemic informed the care duties at home. The sample was split into two categories—women solely undertaking care work at home, and women doing care work in addition to waged work outside the home—to study how the pandemic and increasing demands for care work differentially affected women's self-definition and perceptions about their work. The sample age group ranged from 30 to 50 yrs. Singh and Pattanaik's (2020) definition of care duties, "(i) household maintenance including cooking, cleaning, and shopping; (ii) care of persons living in the house, such as looking after children, the elderly, sick, disabled, or simply other adults requiring care; and (iii) voluntary services or services rendered free to other households or the community" was used to select married women for both categories.

The respondents were selected through convenience and snowball sampling. In a small community, it was easy to reach out to willing participants through pre-existing social networks and kinship ties. A mixture of observation and unstructured interviews, amidst friendly conversations was used to elicit responses. The process of rapport building achieved through social visits helped to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual understanding. Most interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes where they were most comfortable. Only in the case of a few working women, were their workplaces visited. The time of each interview varied owing to disruptions in the domestic setting. During these conversations, biographical details, personal histories, incidents, and stories were recounted, which tied into the narratives.

The informed consent of the respondents was taken before initiating the inter-

views (Birch, Jessop, Mauthner, & Miller, 2008). The purpose of the research was shared with them to allay their concerns before any recordings. Given the patriarchal constraints, the real names of respondents have not been used. Moreover, participants were allowed to leave the interview in case of an emergency. If discussing an event or incident made them uncomfortable it was bypassed until they were comfortable to talk about it again. Also, the research ethic of “integrity” and “responsibility” was followed (Guimaraes, 2007) in analyzing the data. After the transcription of the interviews and consolidation of participant-observation notes, recurring themes resonating with the patterns of the research question(s) were identified and analyzed through constantly revisiting the data as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2013).

Discussion and Analysis

The following sections highlight the major themes identified during the research. These findings draw attention to the inequalities inherent in women’s labor at the household level. The themes also document the respondents’ journey of exploring their selfhood and agency in the context of the pandemic. Here, agency is conceptualized following Kabeer’s (1999) definition which sees it as the “ability to define one’s goals and act on them.” Sen (1987) calls it “agency freedom,” which is “the freedom to achieve whatever the person, as a responsible agent, decides he or she should achieve.” However, a woman as an agent may not drastically act, create, or explicitly try to challenge, overthrow, or make a shift in the power relations by displaying transformative agentive behavior (Sen, 2004), but through direct decision-making, informal, or indirect means may try to step beyond the routine behaviors within existing determined structures reflecting non-transformative agency (Kabbeer, 1999). The consistent use of non-transformative agency (the ability to make their own choices within existing patriarchal structures at the household level) as highlighted through their narrations challenges the universal generalizations about women’s experiences, identities, and social contexts; this is something which is also aptly iterated by third world feminists like Kandiyoti (1988), Mahmood (2001), Malik (2010, 2017), and Iqtidar (2011) among others. The concept of agency has been located within the indigenous experiences of women respondents in their specific contexts to counter their victimized, domesticated, oppressed, and submissive imagery.

This article highlights the fact that female agency in this part of the world cannot be dissociated from its cultural inscription—family dynamics, gender norms,

caste, class, and other socio-economic realities. The research respondents drew their identity not only from the care work they performed but also the dominant discourse of an ideal Muslim woman. The complex relation between religion and gender lurks in respondents' narratives where identity is constantly constructed not from paid employment but from the care work they perform within their households. The idealized Muslim women makes and builds a home through her constant sacrifices, child-rearing, and care for the elderly in the house. In an environment already mired in systemic discrimination and amidst multiple narratives of housework being devalued, unrecognized, unacknowledged, and naturalized as feminine, this research then reveals how women conceive of their identities in relation to these hierarchies and negotiate their position during a crisis such as Covid-9 through their agentive behaviors. They draw strength from the same structures and create conditions of enactment in subtle ways. The Covid-19 pandemic became an interesting context for these women respondents where they kept on reflecting on the biased division of work even while doing daily chores. This constant reflection made them realize their selfhood, inculcated in them the strength to actively engage in the situation, and made them feel somewhat empowered. Although they complained, at the same time they did not wish to overthrow the whole structure. Instead, they tried to change their surroundings or their way of seeing a particular situation and through the use of this non-transformative agency they tried to survive and remain happy.

The Devaluation of Housework

The devaluation of housework was most evident in the narratives of the women. Of the ten housewives interviewed, eight respondents mentioned this devaluation; ten working women also reinforced the same narrative out of which five reported their paid employment also being devalued during the Covid-19.

Work is defined by one or more of the following elements: 1) the binary demarcation of public and private activity; 2) the monetary net worth of a particular activity; 3) the patriarchal definitions about the legitimacy of labeling any activity as work (Waring, 1999). Although unaware of these formal definitions, the respondents felt that the lack of remuneration made their efforts inconsequential. Farah, a housewife aged 31, cited how her husband told her that his income runs the house, to which she felt she had no answer as that was true:

I had to agree to this, because bills, grocery, and children's fees all are being paid from his salary. I don't have any money to run the house.

Sadaf, another housewife aged 50, voiced her opinion:

We live in a cash-based society. The significance of any activity is gauged by whether it's paid or not. Whether you are earning something out of it or not is the main concern. If it is paid then it is assumed as work, something that society needs, and if it is not then the work is devalued. I think that as our household work is not paid, hence it is not valued by anyone. It is true you see. Covid times were the chance when men could see the amount of work performed by women in the house but I don't think so many men acknowledged it.

The Pakistani government imposed a stringent countrywide lockdown to contain the disease. With everyone at home and at greater risk of contracting the disease, the work multiplied. Despite upending many of the women's daily routines, women took it in their stride using different tactics to deal with the situation. Ifra, a housewife aged 46, opined how she dealt with the disturbing Covid times where she had to work nonstop:

Initially, it affected me but then I trained myself to not feel too much about no one valuing my work. I had to do the work anyway so why not do it peacefully.

The pandemic bared another inherent belief that devalues care work performed by women as well as lack of compensation: the flexibility of timings, and the apparently less "control" women have over their routines in comparison to men. The upended routines made the women's work appear self-governed, order-less and whimsical, therefore less important than formal waged work. Kainat, a housewife aged 35, stated how her husband repeatedly mentioned this. She countered him by retorts about the significance of her work instead of staying quiet. The situation during Covid-19 prompted respondents to think and reflect on this issue. They woke up to the realization of their importance in running the households and reflexively discussed it. Maha, a working woman aged 50, who ran a tuition center in her home stressed:

You know, it was my tuition center that had helped us go through the difficult times of Corona, yet my husband would think that it is not work saying, 'you just sit and teach. This is not working. Actual work is what I do at my shop.' I have now stopped believing this narrative (smiles).

Likewise, Sundus a school teacher aged 33, asserted:

I thought to myself that any work that women do is not valued. People never appreciate whatever women do. So I stopped pleasing everyone and just did and thought what made me happy so that I could do my work peacefully.

Covid-19 highlighted the gendered fault lines in many of the households. It made women conscious, reflexive, and active agents who used different ploys to deal with the situation and remain happy. The awareness of gender dynamics within their respective families became crucial to respondents' responses to their family patterns. This consciousness of "knowing and understanding" the sensitivities of their cultural transcripts and then tactfully dealing with it using their agency to make themselves happy, empowered, and relaxed was newly learned during the pandemic.

The Invisibility of Unpaid Care/Housework

The gendered division between the "public" where men exist and the "private" where women are placed makes one "real" and productive work and the other non-productive (Daniels, 1987). The public/private divide further makes women's work invisible by separating men from any affairs of the household, and tying women to familial relationships, marriage, child-rearing, and the household. Respondents commented on the changed circumstances where now men were also relegated to the private sphere, but the recognition of work did not change. This realization made them re-think their own selfhood. The very fact that they continually were looking for answers and trying to connect their subordination with larger systematic discrimination was, in itself, reflective of their agentive selves. Many housewives narrated that their work was rendered invisible because of how closely knit it was to marriage and parenting, a realm in which men have an ancillary involvement. Amber, a working woman aged 38, stated:

Once you are married it is a fact that you are responsible for all the chores. They are always considered a women's duty. It is because of this that the work that women do at home goes unnoticed because no one sees it as work; everyone sees it as a forever obligation of a woman.

Farah, a housewife aged 31, opined that despite being on foot all day and taking care of her three small kids, she constantly hears that she is not working and is just at home. Women respondents had pinned their hopes on the pandemic to have

their work recognized by their partners during that time. Housework during the pandemic gave women the opportunity to reflect on the whole situation. This invisibility of housework was seen by many respondents to be deliberately constructed to benefit the economy and the man's more dominant position in society and some respondents suggested that their husbands knew the value of their work, yet they purposefully ignored it either to satisfy their egos or to deliberately constrict them within the private sphere. This is reaffirmed in Razavi's research, where housework being performed by women fuels society and favors men (2007). Participants also shared how they are constantly fed with the emotional narrative of care work being their job to keep the power balance in place and women in a forever subordinated position. Knowing the benefit their work is providing to the males of the house yet accepting its invisibility by simply laughing it off was noticed in the narratives of participants. Mehwish, a housewife aged 40, asserted:

Whatever I do at home benefits my husband so much. He does not have to be worried about the household chores or affairs. He just does his outside work and that's it. I think we are deliberately fed with this whole idea that it is our job to look after the house. (laughs) Women being too emotional believe that and continue taking responsibility.

Although the work appears invisible to other family members, the women—especially those undertaking waged work—were able to assert the tangibility of care work, which was made evident by the energy spent on it. Respondents also stated that there is continual checking, planning, and restocking going into chores like grocery-shopping, washing, taking care of children, and adapting to the demands and quirks of the family, which make them excessively exhausting, and noticeable to themselves. It was lamented that others do not “see” a task until it is done. Additionally, the idea and constant reiteration that these duties are spontaneously offered by women as an expression of love for their family cloaks the real effort that goes into the execution of these tasks.

The futility of raising their voices against the narrative of “doing nothing” stated by many women respondents was not perceived as an act of submission but a strategy to cope with the situation. For instance, Ushna aged 38, working as a senior program officer at the university in Abbottabad, responded:

There is no use in saying anything. Many times when I had tried communicating this to my husband instead of a resolution, always a new big issue has been created that has resulted in a constrained house environment.

So I now have stopped saying anything.

To evade the debate, tension, and unnecessary arguments that arise from protesting, respondents submitted to the invisibility of their work. Faiza, aged 40 and a teacher by profession, opined:

It is very important that the peace of the house must be maintained. My husband is a bit short-tempered. If at any time I had made mention of the importance of my work, the situation has become worse. I then think that it is better to be silent, at least in that way the peace remains intact.

This “decision to abide and remain silent” to avoid bickering reflects the respondents’ autonomous choice to which Mahmood (2001) refers that every docile action does not reflect passivity but might be a choice taken by women relative to their contexts. The whole narrative of invisibility of house and care work prompted the women respondents to reflect and think about this, which in turn became significant in cultivating an autonomous choice and will to make informed decisions, to make the situation better for living in such times.

Lack of Validation/Appreciation

Taylor (1994, p 26) while stressing the importance of acknowledgment states, “recognition is not just a courtesy but a vital human need.” The respondents lamented the lack of appreciation of their work. They spent unusually long hours on chores during Covid-19 times and expected to be appreciated. Luxton (2009) observes that in the absence of any validation, the job becomes riddled with contradictions where women contest between feelings of satisfaction and frustration. Faiza, a school teacher aged 40, said:

I became extremely conscious of the fact that no one was appreciating me although I was working round the clock. This realization came to me during lockdown you know because before that I did not think much about this, but during such difficult times, when I also got physically and emotionally exhausted, I realized that we women need appreciation for what we are doing right now and what we always do.

Most respondents realized their importance in maintaining the wellness of their families, yet the lack of appreciation seemed to make them feel distant and alienated from their partners instilling in them what Betty Friedan (1963) called the

“sickness without a name.” They complained of spending hours on chores like cooking everyone’s favorite dish, cleaning, laundry, doing the dishes, or taking care of children or parents-in-law without a single word of acknowledgment by any family member, let alone their husbands.

Women respondents in their narration explored reasons for this lack of validation. Some expressed the feeling that as their work is done in the private domain and is personalized for all the members of the family according to their needs, there is no independent assessment of it except for the family who judge them based on individual preferences. In addition, the appreciation is often overshadowed by other ongoing family tensions, general tiredness, lack of communication, or the irritable mood of family members (Daniels, 1987).

Some women expressed a desire to “hear some good words” regarding their work from their partners or other family members. Others saw this as a futile exercise given the gendered behavioral patterns. Zeba, a teacher aged 38, suggested that this was a regular masculine attitude:

How will he praise me, you know? He is a man after all. Men are not trained to express emotions.

Where some respondents sought validation from family members, others constructed their own techniques to evade alienation and frustration, and to feel important in the absence of recognition. Ushna working a nine to five job at a university stated how prior to Covid-19 she would some time go out and have coffee alone to feel refreshed or buy something expensive for herself to boost her confidence. As this was not possible during the lockdown, she made some adjustments. She narrated

My husband was at home during Covid-19. It was the best thing. He spent a lot of time with the children. In that way, I had some free time for myself. Of course, I couldn't go outside but at least I had some time for myself. Also, I gave the responsibility of my eldest daughter's studies to him during Covid times. I got relieved of that too. So I then used to spend a few hours, even if not daily but once in a while as 'for me time'. In that way, I felt happy.

Sundus, a working woman aged 33, similarly stated that she would deliberately re-arrange her cupboards (a work that gave her happiness) when she wanted to just be happy. Ifrah, a housewife aged 47, indulged herself by watching something on her mobile amidst all the housework and non-appreciative behaviors. These distinctive experiences shed light on the multiple ways in which women respondents

used their agency to cope with an unpleasant or frustrating situation during Covid-19.

Society's Gendered Norms

Women are conditioned and trained from childhood to adopt the gendered roles designated by society (Dotti Sani, 2016; Hu, 2015). Society's normative expectations became exponentially strengthened during the pandemic where women's vulnerabilities were aggravated largely because of the additional responsibilities that befell them along with the already inequitable gendered burdens (McLaren et al., 2020). Kainat, a housewife aged 35, recounted:

I just used to hear from my partner, 'This is your job, not mine, so why do you even complain?'

Apart from domestic chores, women participants were expected to be attentive to the emotional needs of the family. Sadaf, a housewife was often told during the lockdown to take care of her husband more than usual as he was under stress to manage the finances during these difficult times. Sundus, a working woman, aged 33 reported how she was expected to attend to her mother-in-law's constant mood swings but claimed it was very hard and exhausting. A stark realization by women evident in their discussions was that this expectation that emotional labor would be fulfilled by women during Covid-19 seemed to be an additional task informed by society's gendered roles and expectations of them..

Interestingly, there were three women participants who echoed not only the realization of their subordination but also exhibited agency by questioning the injustice and asserting the importance of their work. They used religion to argue that housework is not a women's job alone in an attempt to stand up to this bias and in the hope of some reform in their partners' thinking. Kainat, a housewife aged 35, said:

When I was asked by my husband to do all the work, I did it but would make sure to say something so that he realizes that it's not only my job (laughs).

She recounted how at one time when she could not do her chores due to illness and her husband put her on the spot for it, she jokingly quipped:

I was not feeling well so I didn't do anything. But it is okay. It's your home too and you can at least clean up the room to make it better.

Similarly, Ushna a working women aged 38, used religion to persuade her husband to see household chores as a joint responsibility. She explained:

During Covid just to push him to help sometimes I would say that religion doesn't pressure a woman to even breastfeed the child. It is just society that has made it a must for a woman. Our Prophet had helped with the housework so why do men of today feel ashamed of doing that. Saying things like this he would at least pick up the tray (laughs a lot). But yes it was all tiring also to constantly say something to push him to work and forego society's norms.

The Pattern of Constant Scrutiny

Highlighting the pattern of scrutiny, many respondents discussed that even though care work is considered a “woman’s job,” it does not exempt them from the constant questioning, judgment, and scrutiny of the society. Ayesha, a housewife aged 37, constantly on her guard owing to a highly intrusive mother-in-law lamented, “*even I have to cook as per her choice I cannot cook the dish of my choice.*” Covid-19 exacerbated this scrutiny due to the presence of all family members at home during lockdown. It affected the timelines of doing the household tasks. Sadaf, a housewife aged 50, narrated how her mother-in-law became suddenly conscious of how long she was taking to complete each chore. She recalled:

Her behavior became extremely problematic during the lockdown. All of a sudden she started complaining that I am taking too long to cook lunch and dinner. I tried explaining but she never understood and her attitude exhausted me.

Women complained of being stuck in a vicious cycle of censoring by in-laws/partners either for missing trivial tasks or not doing a certain task the “proper” way during Covid-19. Few respondents were seen to challenge this behavior. Mehwish, a housewife aged 40, reminisced:

The times in Corona were so problematic because my husband was at home all the time. He became so interfering all the time. There was no help yet constant criticism and it honestly was very draining. Initially, his attitude exhausted me but then I taught myself to not pay heed to his whining (laughs) because I had to do my work. If I kept on constantly thinking about that it would just make me depressed so after I realized this problem I tackled it that way.

Hira, aged 35, who runs a beauty parlor, narrated the experience of visiting her in-laws in the village during the lockdown and being constantly criticized for not doing things correctly.

I thought to myself that in this way I am like burdening myself by thinking about this and putting an extra effort to do things “right,” so I cultivated in me the practice of ignoring their comments. Doing that made my life so easy honestly (laughs).

After realizing a problem, these women respondents tactfully dealt with it relative to their context that rightly reflected their use of agency, which stands in contrast to the Western definition of agency, that demands revolutionary acts from women. Their agentic behaviors like learning to ignore or consciously rethinking notions of what is to “be at home” in a “culture” and to redefine “cultural loyalty, betrayal, and respect” (Narayan, 1997, p 9) in ways that would suit their survival within the set-up is very instructive.

Motherhood Conundrum

Many respondents showed extreme dissatisfaction with the distant involvement of their partners in child-rearing. All women termed motherhood a “full-time job” undertaken alone by them. The predominant ideology that “children are a mother’s responsibility” and the primary task of married women (Pfau-Effinger, 2010) allowed men to abstain from childcare duties. Kainat a housewife aged 35, opined how she is solely responsible for her daughter and complained of her husband’s indifference. She stated:

He is criticizing Anaya’s eating habits all the time and constantly compares her with my sister-in-law’s children. Anaya vomits everything that she eats. When I ask him to take her to a doctor and find a solution he just brushes off the responsibility asking me to correct her habits instead.

The nature of the pandemic added duties to the list of motherhood previously assigned to formal institutions like schools. One of the respondents Ayesha, a housewife aged 37, narrated how children’s online classes became a nightmare for her as she had to constantly monitor them during the classes. Faiza, a working woman aged 40, also recollected how the need for social distancing affected her kids’ routines and added the new responsibility of looking after them around the clock. Also, the husbands’ constant critique of the children’s upbringing, made

motherhood more tedious during Covid-19 times. Farah, a housewife aged 31, asserted:

I got annoyed with my husband being constantly at home and criticizing the way I dealt with my daughter. Already it was all burdensome and constant criticism made it become more mentally exhausting. Instead of help, my partner became troublesome in the dealings with my daughter.

Many respondents reflecting on the whole motherhood conundrum iterated that in Pakistani society, childcare is mostly organized and embedded in the context of the male bread-winner framework. The nature of childcare in such a framework reflects some sort of informal, unpaid, and hidden type of work performed only by women in the household.

The Dual Burden

Respondents who had outside paid jobs seemed to be under the double pressure of managing and maintaining a fair balance between their multiple roles. The “double shift of housework and paid employment” (Treas & Drobnic, 2010) was evident in the lives of the working women. The “second shift” (Hochschild & Machung, 2003) intensified during the pandemic. A 33-year-old teacher, Sundus, narrated how during lockdown it became extremely tiresome to wake up early, prepare breakfast for everyone, take online classes by midday, and then complete all the house chores. Faiza, also a teacher aged 40, stated:

Sometimes I think I am working more than my husband. It is a dual job. Apart from physical exhaustion, there is also so much mental stress in managing both things.

Covid-19 redefined their workplaces hence merging their public work environments with the private realm of the house. This exacerbated the dual load of the working women respondents, who then considered it very difficult to maintain the demarcation. Women respondents realized working full-time, spending more hours on domestic chores, and performing more tedious tasks than men (Dex, 2004). This dual burden also then affected the efficacy and performance of women respondents in their paid employment. Faiza, a teacher by profession, narrated how many times she conducted her class without a lesson plan.

I would feel guilty about it but then I was usually so tired doing so much at the house that at night I had no energy left in me to prepare for my

online class. So I then chose in my mind to be okay with this because everything cannot be done perfectly (smiles)

Considering women earning more or being equal to men as a deviation from the gender norm (Chauhan, 2020), respondents attempted to reaffirm the status quo by deliberately taking on more of the care load. This dual-burden realization was something that made respondents “exhausted, tired, and stressed out” yet attempts were made to sometimes pick and choose which work must be done first. Through this informal decision-making, respondents sought ways to tackle the pressure.

Conclusion

This study analyzes the experiences of women in this part of the world with the contention that the experiences of women in the West are usually and casually used as a norm to gauge the condition and imagery of women of the Third World and that any international perspective without the critical scrutiny of the role of women in their cultural and national contexts would only be a form of supranationalism. In this perspective, the study has aimed to bring to the fore women’s experiences of unpaid labor during the COVID-19 pandemic in Abbottabad, Pakistan. Though not intended to be a representational study, its essence nonetheless furthers the idea that women must not be considered as existing in a vacuum; the social and cultural contexts are integral to a woman’s formed identity. Any cultural prescription shapes, and forms a woman’s vision of everything in life. The significant finding that surfaced through this study was the realization of the agentive self, identity, and individuality of these women respondents during the Covid pandemic through the very system of subordination and biased division of labor that was meant to oppress them. It was during the pandemic that these respondents were subjected to excessive care work with so little structural, emotional, and familial support that they became reflexively aware of the biased division of labor and the disproportionate burden they had been shouldering ever since. The analysis of experiences shared by respondents indicates their thought processes, their comprehension of this division of labor, and their actions to deal with the situation. Each theme echoes the respondents’ voices and their opinions regarding their unpaid care work. The discussion is subtly intertwined with the subjectivity of the narrators, which takes the reader into the world of these respondents, yet simultaneously generates the critical analysis that helps to under-

stand their standpoints. Through the narrations, the non-transformative use of agency is highlighted by the respondents. The small informal decisions, for instance handing over the responsibility of the elder daughter's studies to the partner to have some free extra time, wrapping up the domestic work to spend some time alone, mildly contesting the traditionalism, by time and again referring to the significance of care work, or training oneself to overlook the constant criticism and pay no heed to it are only a few examples of the decisions that the respondents took to take charge of the situation and remain at peace.

Interestingly however, the awakening of agency in their actions was not connected to the idea of bringing a drastic change to the patriarchal organization of their homes. The idea of religion placing the man as the head of the house was constantly referred to throughout the narrations. This shows the respondents' deep connection to the traditional religious discourse, which frames the separate public and private responsibilities for both men and women. They had been conditioned to perform all the care work happily to be culturally authentic and religiously correct. This conditioning shapes their perception of the care work: although they got frustrated, annoyed, and disappointed at the biased division of work at the household level, they colluded in its existence in the society at large. Their desire to remain true to their cultural and religious values and be a true Pakistani woman overtook the will to alter this arrangement. Thus, in this context, they used their agency in non-transformative ways to find ground within this system. All of this does not in any way make them feel oppressed, and submissive. Instead, the informal decision-making made them feel empowered enough to turn the situation in their favor.

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