

Women’s Paid Work in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Our study examines the significant barriers to women's labor force participation in Pakistan, which has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates in South Asia. Drawing on literature review, analysis of Pakistan Labor Force Surveys, and primary qualitative research, we identify key structural, cultural, and intra-household dynamics that constrain women's economic opportunities. These include persistent gender norms, occupational segregation, mobility restrictions, and household power dynamics. Our qualitative survey of 50 married women in Pakistan’s largest metropolitan city, Karachi, reveals that harassment and safety concerns, family opposition, and childcare responsibilities remain as primary barriers to women’s participation in paid work. Our work highlights how these factors collectively create a challenging environment for Pakistani women seeking employment. Despite constitutional guarantees of gender equality, women's economic empowerment remains severely limited by practical barriers.

Women are less likely to:

Earn interviews

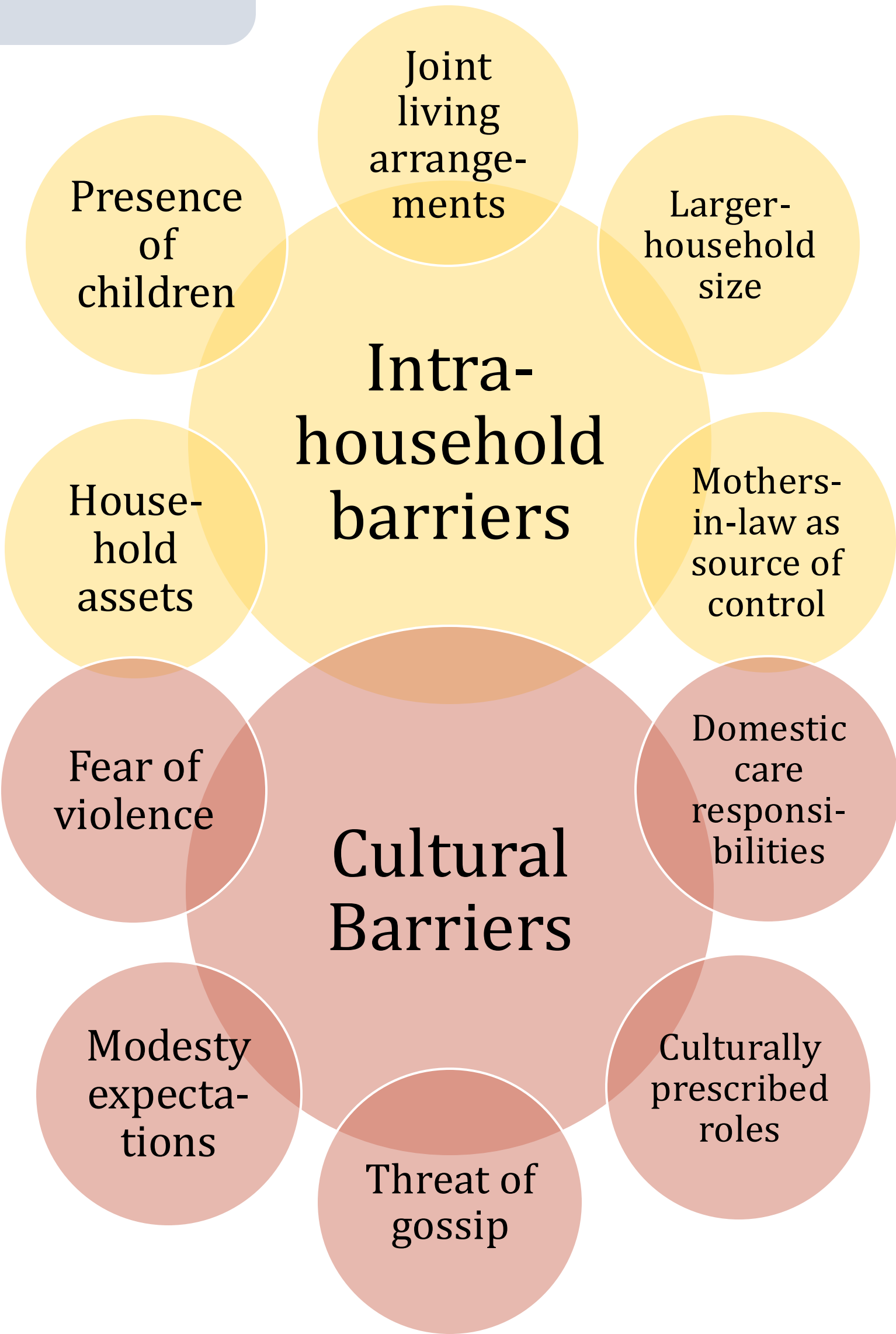
Receive job offers

Be considered for promotions

Be invited to job trainings

As women workers often must balance work and domestic responsibilities, they are negatively impacted by lack of suitable transportation, lack of childcare, lack of residential accommodations, inadequate maternity leave, inflexible working hours, and lack of remote work opportunities.

Sexual harassment can lead women to avoid work, be fired for making allegations, be forced to ignore harassment, or play into harassment to keep their jobs.



METHODS

Methodology:

- 1) Literature review
- 2) Descriptive statistical analysis
- 3) Qualitative survey analysis

Data sources:

- 1) Secondary data (World Bank Data, ILO statistics, Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, World Values Survey, Gallup Pakistan polls, WIN World Survey)
- 2) Primary data: semi-structured interviews with 50 women in Karachi, Pakistan (Interviews explored lived experiences of labor market barriers, personal and professional restrictions, and various attitudes on women’s work) (Aug-Dec 2019, Jan-Sept 2022)

Mobility Restrictions (multiple responses allowed)

68%	Cannot travel alone after dark due to fear of harassment
52%	Need permission for visiting friends/family or going outside
38%	Fear of harassment on public transport
25%	Lack of economical transport

Family Support for Women’s Work

22%	Fully supportive
45%	Conditional support
15%	Neutral
18%	Against work outside home

Marriage Age

42%	Married between 19 and 22
28%	Married between 15 and 18
30%	Married after 23

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

43% unemployment rate for college-educated women (7% for men)

30.4% labor force participation gap

67.1% literacy rate gender gap

Female labor force participation: **28%** rural vs. **10%** urban

24% female labor force participation (80% for men)

75.1 percentage point gender gap in economic participation

WEF’s Global Gender Gap Report ranks Pakistan **145th out of 146** countries.

34% wage gap

KEY LITERATURE

Cultural Stigma and Mobility Restrictions

Stigma against women’s mobility, interaction with non-related men, and participation in paid work (Ahmed, 2020).

Intrahousehold Dynamics

While marriage may increase social mobility, it simultaneously intensifies domestic responsibilities (Khalil, 2021; 2024). Family size, presence of children, and joint living arrangements negatively correlate with women’s workforce participation (Ejaz, 2007).

Workplace Barriers

Labor market discrimination through explicit gender preferences in job advertisements, with women preferred only for traditionally feminine roles like teaching and healthcare (Khalil, 2021). Employers frequently categorize positions as “men’s” or “women’s” jobs based on gender norms rather than qualifications (Nasir, 2005).

QUALITATIVE SURVEY FINDINGS

- Significant gaps remain in implementation and enforcement of legal protections and formal commitments to gender equality
- Traditional gender norms and structural barriers continue to limit women’s economic opportunities
- Qualitative research provides valuable insights into lived experiences, highlighting women’s agency and resilience