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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Family Norms and Female Poverty in South Asia: the Mediating Role of Female Labour Force Participation

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Abstract

Introduction: The intersection of poverty and gender manifests in disproportionately high levels of female poverty. In this context, female labour force participation (FLFP) is a critical area of inquiry, particularly regarding gender equality and poverty reduction – key priorities of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which emphasizes social and economic inclusion. However, empirical research exploring the role of female labour force (FLF) as a mediating factor in women's gendered experiences of poverty – particularly as shaped by traditional family norms in the developing world – remains limited. The present study addresses this gap by examining the dynamics of FLFP and gendered poverty within the socio-cultural context of Pakistan, which is a developing country in South Asia.

Methods: Adopting a qualitative research paradigm and a narrative inquiry approach, data were collected from 20 purposively selected female respondents from the labour force in Pakistan. Using Glaser's data collection technique, we conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews to capture personal experiences and social realities. The data were analysed inductively using a semantic approach, guided by Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework.

Results: The findings indicate that a combination of patriarchal exploitation and capitalist structures, embedded within the institution of family, systematically marginalises women. This dual dynamic leads to both social exclusion and economic abuse, reinforcing women's socioeconomic dependence and contributing to feminisation of poverty.

Conclusion: The intersection of patriarchy and capitalism sustains socio-economic systems in developing countries that depend on a low-cost, compliant female workforce in both private and public spaces. Consequently, women remain economically active yet persistently poor and powerless. Ad-

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dressing this paradox demands institutional reforms to advance the inclusion goals of Agenda 2030. Policies must target gendered power structures and ensure women's economic participation translates into real empowerment and poverty reduction.

Keywords

Agenda 2030, capitalist patriarchy, economic coercion, feminisation of poverty, social exclusion, economic dependence

JEL codes: A13, B55, F63, I3, J16, Z13

Introduction

Women constitute 70% of the multidimensionally poor across 107 countries (OPHD 2020; UNDP 2020), highlighting gender disparities in poverty. The poverty rates are disproportionately higher in Africa and Asia, with women bearing the brunt of this inequality. A recent report on the progress of Agenda 2030 predicts that around six million people will remain in poverty by 2030, with gender equality as a key concern (UN Women 2024). The report underscores the alarming socioeconomic situation of women in the Global South (Bradshaw et al. 2019).

According to research, the institution of family inherently contributes to female poverty (Fredman 2016; Maqsood et al. 2024). Gender-based norms sustain a stringent socioeconomic family environment that creates female vulnerability and marginalisation (Nguyen 2022). Traditional cultures often enforce patriarchal ideologies that assign distinct spaces, roles, and statuses to men and women (Wolff 2020), thereby limiting women's access to resources, restricting their decision-making power and mobility, and hindering their ability to acquire education and skills (Sahoo and Klasen 2018).

The resulting lack of capabilities, driven by systemic discrimination, compels many women to engage in informal work – particularly in agriculture, domestic service, and home-based industries – perpetuating the cycle of female poverty (Maqsood et al. 2024). Working in blue-collar and pink-collar jobs, women earn significantly less than men even for comparable work. Moreover, socio-cultural barriers continue to restrict women's access to economic resources and ownership of assets. Likewise, women lack financial inclusion and awareness of conventional banking services, Fintech banking, credit, and investment opportunities (Amber and Chichaibelu 2023; Akhtar et al. 2025). Consequently, their potential for economic mobility and entrepreneurship remains untapped. Consequently, these conditions contribute to the persistence of multidimensional poverty among women. (Farhall and Rickards 2021; Mouafo 2024).

Female poverty in developing countries is a chronic issue, influenced by deep-rooted cultural, social, and economic factors that challenge equitable socioeconomic growth and development. While there has been some improvement in recent decades, these countries persistently remain below the poverty line, with women being disproportionately affected (Bukhari et al. 2024). Rural areas experience higher poverty rates, largely due to widespread illiteracy and inadequate physical and digital infrastructure required for access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Haq et al. 2024). Moreover, the lack of gender-disaggregated data makes it challenging to measure the exact scale of female poverty in these regions (Hossain et al. 2024).

The intersection of traditional family norms and female poverty is a critical area of study in the developing world, characterised by widespread poverty. One such region is South Asia, where socio-cultural norms play a key role in shaping economic opportunities and constraints and creating marginalisation and deprivation of women. In this context, FLFP serves as a critical mediating factor in addressing socioeconomic gender disparities (Flood et al. 2021), aligning with the objectives of both Agenda 2025 and Agenda 2030. Agenda 2030 focuses on financing mechanisms and resource mobilisation to promote inclusivity and collaboration, and Agenda 2025 is the mid-term framework for implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It emphasises prioritising vulnerable populations, strengthening partnerships, and improving data collection to track progress.

Exploring female poverty and its underlying factors in South Asia reveals a complex interplay of social, cultural, and economic variables, offering critical insights for policy interventions aimed at promoting equality and inclusion. Accordingly, this study investigates the role of family norms in shaping female poverty and examines how female labour force participation (FLFP) mediates this relationship.

Background

South Asia faces significant challenges related to female poverty, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which furthered women's susceptibility to economic hardships. While countries such as Bangladesh and Nepal have launched social protection programs for women, addressing the underlying structural issues – such as limited access to resources, property rights, financial services, and employment opportunities – remains a critical challenge. These systemic barriers continue to perpetuate female poverty across social and economic domains.

Pakistan, which is a developing country in South Asia, portrays a true picture of women's socioeconomic situation in third-world countries. Because a sizable population in Pakistan lives below the poverty threshold (Asian Development Bank 2013), the country faces difficulties in addressing poverty, especially female poverty (Jafree 2023). Based on the lower middle-income poverty threshold, an estimated 39.3% of Pakistanis live in poverty (World Bank 2024). Likewise, according to the findings of the National Assembly, 22% of the citizens live below the national poverty level (Shehzad 2021). A recent study (Haq et al. 2024) corroborates the findings, establishing that one-fourth of Pakistan's population is multidimensionally poor, conditional on the prevailing macroeconomic situation. Moreover, the evident rural-urban disparity contributes to these poverty figures. While a high percentage of the urban population is moderately poor, a higher percentage of the rural population is extremely poor, most of whom are illiterate women (Akmal and Akmal 2023). Correspondingly, research (Bukhari et al. 2024) asserts that female poverty in Pakistan is significantly influenced by dynamic factors, such as gender, education, and familial ideology. In this context, Pakistan seems to deviate from Article 16 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979, by defying gender equality. Similarly, despite women's constitutional rights, policies fail to promote FLFP (Meseguer-Sánchez et al. 2020; Adham 2022; Khan 2020; Jafree 2023). Hence, 75% of the 39.3% extremely poor population in Pakistan comprises women (World Bank 2024).

Pakistan has an equal male-to-female population ratio (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, LFS 2020–2021). However, despite Islamic jurisprudence that is regarded as a vanguard for women's rights, the presence of pro-women legislation promoting gender equality, and Pakistan's commitment to global gender equality treaties, FLFP remains low, especially in the

formal sector and most notably in urban areas at regional as well as global levels (World Economic Forum 2023). Low FLFP in Pakistan indicates significant underutilisation of female potential. Moreover, low literacy rates further restrict women's career options and economic outcomes (PSLM 2019-2020). In addition, as reported in the Pakistan Demographic and Health Survey (PDHS), women's health status is also below average, with malnutrition and anaemia being the most prominent issues, which further limit their economic involvement and productivity.

The missing piece

Previous studies have highlighted the persistence of restrictive gender norms across South Asian countries and their detrimental impact on female poverty. For instance, Bukhari et al. (2024) and Haq et al. (2024) investigated the dimensions of multidimensional poverty; Roomi and Parrott (2008) and Khan (2020) examined structural and social barriers to female entrepreneurship, while Wiswall and Zafar (2018) and Nosheen et al. (2024) explored the socio-cultural and socioeconomic factors contributing to female poverty. However, literature on the intersection of poverty and gender-based family norms is limited, particularly regarding the mediating role of FLFP. In light of this gap, and recognising the significance of the issue, this study investigates how gendered family practices intensify female poverty and the extent to which FLFP mediates this relationship.

Novelty and significance

Our study contributes novel insights and significant findings by offering a context-specific analysis of the interaction among the variables: family norms, female poverty, and FLFP in developing countries. The findings inform programs, policies, and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and addressing the normative barriers hinder progress in this area. Furthermore, the study provides valuable information to relevant organisations on the progress and prospects of achieving the goals of Agenda 2030 in the Global South.

Moreover, this study is the first to explore the relationship between female poverty and family norms in South Asia, a region where patriarchal ideology profoundly influences the socioeconomic aspects. Examining how family norms contribute to women's socioeconomic dependence and feminisation of poverty, this research distinguishes itself from previous studies on female poverty. Additionally, by highlighting FLFP as a key mediator, the study provides a holistic view of the intricate relationship between societal norms and women's economic participation and outcomes.

Theoretical perspective

Looking at poverty from a theoretical point of view helps develop a better understanding of the complicated social, economic, and cultural issues that affect the lives of impoverished individuals, particularly women. In this context, human capital theory posits that poverty is borne by illiteracy because low-income families do not adequately invest in children's education and skills (Ortner 2022). This perspective is particularly relevant as traditional cultures neglect the importance of female education, reinforcing gendered inequalities that contribute to female poverty. However, literature (Mihai et al. 2015) argues that education alone cannot be a reliable indicator of economic outcomes, as it may not necessarily translate

into employment and economic productivity. Therefore, in addition to education, a broader range of factors, such as access to resources, social networks, and structural inequalities, need to be considered when exploring female poverty (Cantillon 2022).

Accordingly, examining female poverty through the lens of the socialist feminist framework (Robinson 1985) offers a nuanced perspective on the gendered dynamics of social and economic structures, identifying systemic injustices rooted in capitalism and patriarchy (Weldon 2008; Mouafo 2024). Neo-patriarchy, the contemporary form of patriarchy, is the interaction between modernity and tradition in the context of capitalism (Habiba et al. 2016). The foundational structures of modern neo-patriarchal societies remain deeply rooted in patriarchal social relations (Zarbali 2023), which reinforce male dominance across both private and public spheres through distinct and hierarchical social arrangements (Qureshi et al. 2023). At the micro level, these structures operate in relationships, families, workplaces, and marital ties, and at the macro level, they operate within bureaucracies, governments, laws, markets, and religious functions (Adham 2022).

Likewise, the capability approach provides a relevant framework for rethinking poverty and its broader implications (Sen 1995, 2010; Nussbaum 2000). Central to the capability framework are the constructs of freedom and opportunity, which are denied to women in the Global South (Kabeer 2021).

Integration of these theoretical frameworks offers deeper insights into the complex nature of female poverty, highlighting the interplay of gender, economic systems, and social conventions, and emphasising the need for policy interventions tailored to the specific needs and capacities of women experiencing poverty.

Social and economic systems

Historically, poverty has been viewed as a misfortune akin to illness, or a consequence of class and gender inequality (Birkmann et al. 2022; Bradshaw and Linneker 2023). While income deprivation reflects survival poverty, the deprivation of rights constitutes another form of poverty, closely linked to development (Sen 2010). Such complex and multifaceted nature of poverty led to the concept of multidimensional poverty (MP), which encompasses non-financial factors such as health, nutrition, education, access to basic services, happiness, freedom, life expectancy, and social inclusion (Alkire 2023). Thus, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) was developed and has since gained global acceptance as a comprehensive measure of poverty.

Sindzingre's (2005) perspective on poverty closely aligns with Sen's perspective that poverty is shaped by the interaction of norms and institutions. Institutions practice discrete allocation of resources and function as cognitive forces in shaping personal beliefs and actions. These institutional and normative frameworks influence individuals' perceptions and their efforts to escape poverty. In this context, Lemke (2010) emphasises that cognitive representations of helplessness perpetuate poverty, as marginalised groups fail to engage with the institutions that could help them overcome their marginalisation. Building on this stance, Mosse (2010) asserts that the impoverished, lacking both information and negotiating power, are demotivated to assert their rights or challenge their circumstances.

Moreover, it is believed that anti-saving behaviours also contribute to poverty traps that reinforce societal polarisation, disproportionately affecting women (Chantarat and Barrett 2012). Poor mothers pass this intergenerational poverty to their daughters, who, just like their mothers, lack the education, health, and/or motivation to fight for their rights (De Schutter et al. 2023). Patriarchal family structures are prone to perpetuating this cycle by re-

inforcing social and economic regulations that foster female vulnerability and dependence to enjoy maintain male hegemony (Jahan 2022).

In this context, spatial configuration plays a crucial role in reinforcing gender hierarchies. Social and spatial dimensions are closely interconnected, with gendered spatial boundaries creating conditions for female vulnerability (Kunwar 2021). These boundaries extend from private to public space with entrenched power dynamics, associating femininity with domesticity and submission, and masculinity with power and freedom (Reeser 2020).

These gendered distinctions are reinforced through social roles and everyday interactions (Williams 2023). In this context, the institution of family plays a key role. Family norms endorse female frailty, passivity, and naivety – traits that perpetuate female vulnerability (Yasmin and Husna 2020; Zhang et al. 2024) by restricting women's access to public spaces and limiting their opportunities for education, social networking, and economic participation and empowerment (Sahoo and Klasen 2018; Kabeer 2021). Therefore, seen as physically fragile, socioeconomically dependent, and psychologically vulnerable, women largely remain at the bottom rungs of patriarchal societies (Ali et al. 2023).

Family norms and feminisation of poverty

Family is a fundamental social unit and the structural foundation for human existence, based on the system of interdependence. However, the binary gender roles and relationships concretise the patriarchal worldview by establishing female servitude, which benefits the family and society but has a cost for women (Robinson 1985; Bjerén 2021). Male family members determine female mobility, social interactions, conduct, and responsibilities that substantially consume women's time and energy (Elder et al. 2020; Geda and Guli 2021), and women too submissively accept this intersectionality as a natural order (Kutub 2023).

Female intersectionality, negotiated by a complex web of forced identities and expectations, leads to the feminisation of poverty (Crenshaw 2019; Kaushik 2022; Mazzone 2022). The patriarchal ideology requires male dominance as the defining feature of society (Ortner 2022). Therefore, female identities are shaped by their roles as caregivers (Kabeer 2021). Paradoxically, although breadwinning and caregiving are interdependent, patriarchal societies, despite the principle of interdependence, keep breadwinning above caregiving (Kutub 2023). Consequently, women are constrained from accessing public space, which keeps them socioeconomically dependent on men (Maqsood et al. 2024).

Moreover, the family norm of *purdah*, entailing seclusion and full body covering, is employed as a mechanism to restrict women's mobility and reinforce the perceived indispensability of male guardianship (Aksar et al. 2020). According to this norm, men must always be women's security providers. In parents' houses, fathers and brothers serve as women's guardians; after marriage, the spouse and father-in-law do the duty; and on being widowed, sons and/or male relatives take the responsibility (Ortner 2022). This norm is guided by the perception that a woman without a guardian is highly vulnerable to social stigma, including the suspicion of sexual misconduct or unwanted attention from men in the public space (Maqsood et al. 2024). This imposed security keeps women dependent and docile in both spaces (Kabeer 2020). In this situation, FLFP is a practical tool to help women break the intergenerational cycle of poverty, as paid work provides them a means to access resources and gradually become socioeconomically independent (Alkire 2023). In addition, their economic contribution not only accelerates economic growth and prosperity but also advances progress toward the SDGs outlined in Agenda 2030 (Ali et al. 2023).

Based on the literature, this study conceptualises that gender-based family norms lead to female poverty as presented in Fig. 1.

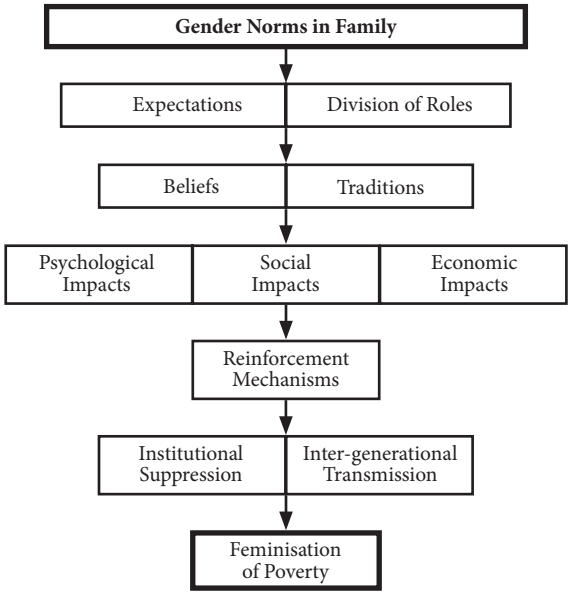

Figure 1. Conceptual framework

Methods

Research design

Using a qualitative research paradigm, we chose the narrative inquiry method to conduct in-depth interviews with female respondents from the informal sector for data collection. It allowed the collection of insightful data on respondents' real-life experiences of the study variables (family norms, female poverty, and FLFP). We analysed the data inductively (Cresswell 2013) through Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis framework (2006).

The data collection and analysis were guided by two central research questions: (1) How do family norms contribute to the creation of female poverty? and (2) How does female labour force participation (FLFP) mediate the relationship between family norms and female poverty? We applied Glaser's (2014) theoretical framework of methodical data gathering, handling, and valuation through a semantic approach. The interview guide, comprising open-ended questions and probes, served as an effective tool to elicit rich and relevant information from respondents through a conversational and flexible interviewing style. Candid interviews, as suggested by Weiss (1995), enabled data collection and analysis to focus specifically on variables specific to the developing region.

We coded the data by identifying common patterns related to the variables of our study. Gathering the codes with common patterns under similar categories caused larger themes to emerge, logically presenting respondents' perspectives (Joffe 2011).

Population and sampling

Our research population was FLF, and the inclusion criteria were: 1) age between 20 and 60 years, and 2) informal sector participation for at least one year. We used multiple sampling techniques to recruit socioeconomically, demographically, and professionally diverse respondents to cover a wide range of the larger population. The respondents were based in Islamabad and nearby towns. Because the target population was informal FLF, the search started with identifying and reaching out to potential candidates.

Using convenience purposive sampling, we initially identified 15 candidates working in Islamabad. Subsequently, we employed the snowball sampling technique, expanding our search to nearby towns, based on referrals provided by the initially identified participants. This approach increased the pool to 32 candidates. To address the recruitment bias, we conducted a pilot test, during which 4 participants withdrew due to family consent issues, and 8 were excluded due to their inhibitions in providing sufficient data for analysis. Ultimately, the final sample comprised 20 participants, representing diverse marital statuses (never married, married, divorced, and widowed) and educational backgrounds ranging from no formal education to a school certificate. These participants, drawn from lower-middle and lower-income groups, resided in urban and semi-urban areas and were employed as domestic workers, healthcare service providers, home-based educational providers, agricultural workers, and own-account workers.

Data collection

We acquired verbal consent from the finalised respondents and communicated research objectives, procedures, and implications to them, requesting the interview schedule based on their convenience and availability. Respondents mostly preferred public places such as parks or eateries as the interview venue. Most of them also agreed to be audio-recorded. We used a semi-structured interview guide, and interview protocols validated by two field experts (one industry expert and two academic experts).

We conducted the interviews in a conversational style as guided by Joffe (2011). Starting with small talk, we gradually moved to open-ended questions and used probes for focus and clarity. Because the respondents were assured complete confidentiality of their data and identities, they candidly shared their experiences in their native language (Urdu and/or Punjabi). Each interview took between 15 and 30 minutes. We also offered a reward of PKR 1000 to each respondent for research participation. In some cases, we also made payments for respondents' rides to and from the interview site.

After the twelfth interview, responses began to show significant repetition, indicating data saturation. At this stage, we rephrased the questions in the hope of novel responses. However, it was clear that we had reached the saturation point as described by Hossain et al (2024). Despite this, we proceeded to interview all participants to ensure completeness and consistency in data collection.

We transcribed the audio-recorded responses and translated them into English language, using the double translation method, with the assistance of a language expert. The translation was peer-reviewed for triangulation and validity.

Data analysis

We collected primary data conducted as a narrative inquiry through in-depth semi-structured interviews with female respondents from the informal labour market. Qualitative

data took us to Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis (TA) framework that promises a systematic and rigorous analysis of qualitative data.

We started the analysis by immersing ourselves in the data, repeatedly reading through the transcripts to develop familiarity with the overall content and context, which helped with identifying key ideas and understanding the nuances of respondents' experiences. Next, by highlighting significant and interesting text segments that captured the essence of the data, we moved on to preliminary coding. We coded each piece of relevant data and assigned descriptive labels to it (Baralt 2011). Thereafter, we grouped similar codes and started finding patterns by clustering the codes with shared features. It involved reviewing the codes, creating mind maps to visualise the connections, and finding potential themes emerging from the codes. Then we reviewed the themes to ensure accurate representation of the data. After this, we defined the themes, ensuring that they captured the essence of the findings (Joffe 2011). Thereafter, we started writing detailed descriptions, considering how the themes contributed to answering the research questions. We repeated the process several times for consistency and reliability and got the results peer-reviewed for triangulation and validation as proposed by Cresswell (2013).

Ethical considerations

We followed all ethical considerations throughout the study as proposed by Mirza et al. (2023). Respondents' formal consent was taken (Cresswell 2013); the institutional review board was consulted (Joffe 2011); and anonymity was maintained (Walford 2005). Moreover, subject experts validated the research tool and interview protocols; and the research team conducted a pilot study; ensuring the credibility and validity of data collection, analysis, and results through data saturation, triangulation, and peer review (Weiss, 1995; Glaser, 2014).

Results

Thematic analysis surfaced the umbrella themes of *patriarchal exploitation* and *capitalist nuances*. Fig. 2 presents the thematic map.

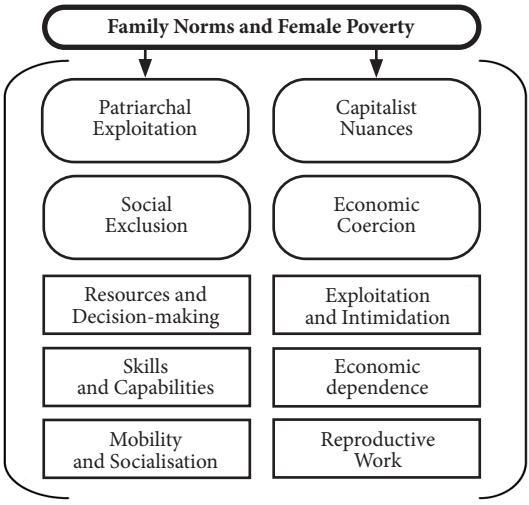

Figure 2. Thematic map. *Source:* Authors' Data Analysis

Patriarchal exploitation

Patriarchal exploitation refers to the systematic social isolation of respondents through control over their access to resources, capabilities, decision-making, mobility, and decent work, leading to systemic poverty.

Respondents' families were deeply entrenched in patriarchal norms, characterising male dominance in resource allocation and decision-making. Hence, respondents had limited access to resources and capabilities required for decent paid work. "Our families are male-headed. Men decide how to treat women, what resources women should have, and whether women should be educated."

Moreover, the patriarchal family set-up led to respondents' limited mobility and social marginalisation.

My husband is the family head, and he makes family rules. He decides who I meet and for how long. Although my parents live in the neighbourhood, I cannot visit them alone. My husband accompanies me, and I have to come back with him. Also, he does not permit me to attend family gatherings.

According to respondents, one of the basic reasons for female poverty was women's restricted mobility, which led to their social exclusion because it limited their economic opportunities.

Our society provides guidelines to families, and my family is strict about what people say. So my brothers do not let me make friends or even have a cell phone. I go out of my home only for work, and that too with my brother. I understand that this strictness is for women's safety, but these restrictions make me feel as if I am a slave.

Apart from limited socialisation and networking, male reliance on mobility also cost job opportunities to respondents.

I cannot go out alone and cannot use public transport. Because of this, I lost five job opportunities as my father was busy and could not take me to the job interview. Although I wear an abaya (gown), he still does not let me go out alone.

The system of *purdah* (seclusion) and *chardiwari* (private space) further exacerbated women's mobility constraints.

One day, the house caught fire. My husband was away. I was in danger, but did not leave the boundary of my house, or else my husband would divorce me. Thank God, I survived from critical injury. We do not have permission to leave home alone, even if it is a matter of life and death.

The norm that women could not go out alone compromised female education, skills, social networking, and decent work: "We have to struggle to find work because the market demands professional education and skills. I got this job because it did not require education or traveling far from home."

Without resources, mobility, confidence, and education, respondents were unable to secure decent jobs or accumulate any savings.

Our families believe that women are born to serve men. They think that girls do not need education and skills. They fail to realise that being illiterate and unskilled means no good jobs. So when we have small jobs, there is no saving.

Respondents also shared that family culture rendered them a passive lifestyle, making them under-confident, feel less important, and reliant on male family members.

My father is a strict man. We have grown up in his fear. We never had a chance to visit the market alone and quietly accepted even the clothes of his choice. I am a grown-up now, but I am unable to get his fear out of me. I feel that I will be afraid of my husband as well when I get married.

The power hierarchy within the family not only relegated respondents to the confines of home but also exposed them to domestic violence and victimisation.

My husband is abusive, violent, and ruthless. He thinks that I am his slave. There are days when I am beaten to the extreme of broken bones. After he has poured out his rage on me, he expects me to assist him with his work on the farm, and I do that to save myself from more beatings.

Findings surfaced respondents' miserable situation: "Our families think that we are born to serve them, and we do not have our own needs, time, or life. They order, and we follow."

Patriarchal family norms seemed to have normalised female abuse and violence as respondents reported routine occurrences of abuse, harassment, and exploitation.

Oh God! Be our saviour. Men torture us, although they seek pleasure from our bodies. They exploit us the way they please, and there is no one to stop them.

Respondents' narratives established that the familial power hierarchy kept women in control, and female exploitation that began at home was subsequently extended to other institutions.

Capitalist nuances

Another larger theme was *capitalist nuances,* which refers to the economic values that influence family dynamics, roles, and relationships. It relates to how capitalism shapes family norms that prioritise women's reproductive roles as primary caregivers and limit their labour force participation (LFP), promoting a cycle of economic dependency that creates female poverty.

The analysis revealed that the economic structure of respondents' families, characterised by male control over resources, was deeply embedded in capitalist dynamics. The family norms limited their ability to acquire, use, and maintain financial resources. Moreover, in line with traditions, family assets were passed down to or grabbed by male descendants.

My brothers got my signature on a stamp paper and usurped my property. I was uneducated and did not know what was happening. I got to know about what my brothers had done to me when my husband lost his job and told me to get my share of the family inheritance.

It was alarming that respondents' income was also controlled by their families, which doubly jeopardised them because, despite doing additional work, they remained penniless.

I have no cash in hand or savings for hard times because my husband controls my earnings. We have been married for ten years. Yet I do not know about his earnings or his activities outside the home. He keeps his things and income to himself, but forces me to give away my income to him.

Exploitation, abuse, and control over respondents' productive labor and their economic exclusion seemed to be the norm, which kept them from entrepreneurial ventures.

My husband had sold my jewellery when his mother had surgery, and my brothers did not give me my share of the family inheritance. If I had my property or jewelry, I could have started my own work instead of working for others. I feel so worthless.

Respondents' narratives indicated that their families were not interested in educating them because it cost them money, while male education was considered a lucrative investment.

My brothers were admitted to school while my sisters and I studied at home. My father was against female education, and my mother also wanted us to learn housekeeping to be good wives in the future. Girls with good housekeeping skills have a bright chance of receiving marriage proposals.

Respondents' discrimination stemmed from their womanhood and the ensuing gender-based roles that associated them with reproductive labour.

Gender has divided society and even family relations. We are made to work at home and take care of all family members. It takes up all our time. We are not prepared for jobs. We are not allowed to go to school or vocational centers.

Respondents' engagement in part-time employment was largely driven by their reproductive responsibilities, which also subjected them to time poverty, and time poverty led to health poverty. The circumstances did not allow for the use of convenience consumption to outsource domestic responsibilities, limiting opportunities to invest time in paid work or health-related activities.

Working for long hours is difficult because of domestic responsibilities. So I have part-time work. Even in pregnancy, I do all the work at home and also continue my job. It takes a toll on my health because I have insufficient time for rest.

The familial hierarchy demanded that respondents take care of the family by undertaking all household work, which limited their chances of participation in full-time, formal, and decent work or entrepreneurial ventures.

It is not just my family; every family in the neighbourhood follows the same pattern. Women must do all the housework, take care of the family members, attend to the guests, and feed the sick and the elderly. All these tasks consume all our time and energy.

Almost all respondents had grievances regarding the lack of family support, which created issues of time poverty.

It is only women who make compromises. I give all my time to my family and serve them by cooking and cleaning, doing their dirty laundry, and taking care of them, but I find no one by my side when I need help or some self-time.

Furthermore, respondents also faced discrimination in employment opportunities and workplace treatment because of their family background, grooming, and attire.

I have become what my family wanted me to be. Now, how can I change my crude accent? How can I take a shower every day when there is no water? How can I look presentable when there are no good clothes and no peace at home?

Moreover, almost all respondents had joined the labour market for livelihood because they were allowed to do paid work when additional income was required to supplement the insufficient male income. Therefore, respondents' earnings were primarily spent on family and household needs, leaving them financially dependent and unable to improve their own economic situation. Moreover, the lack of need-based support from both family and workplace, made paid work challenging, adding to their misery.

I started working due to the increased expenses when we had a baby. There is no childcare facility at my workplace, and no one in the family is willing to take care of her. When I bring her to work, we are mistreated. When I leave her at home, she is unattended. My family shares the money I earn, but not the extra burden I take to earn money.

The respondents' accounts revealed that the institution of family exploited women and their work in both private public spaces, reflecting capitalist nuances through male control over resources and unpaid work of women which perpetuates economic inequalities and female poverty.

Discussion

Examining the findings through the socialist feminist lens, it can be claimed that the patriarchy-capitalism combo creates gender discrimination by upholding traditional gender norms to control women right away in the very first place, the institution of the family. This

control shapes social and economic structures in multidimensional ways, exposing women to intergenerational poverty, as noted by Kunwar (2021) and Kaushik (2022).

First, our findings endorse that the neo-patriarchy ingrained in the family structure systemically controls the female gender (Jahan 2022). This control is exercised by restricting female mobility in the name of security and piety, and by limiting their opportunities for socialisation and networking, as documented by Aksar et al (2020) and Ortner (2022). Moreover, male headship reinforces female intersectionality (Kunwar 2021) by keeping women from exercising their rights to resources, education, decision-making, freedom, and inheritance, which is against the religion, constitution, and global pacts that grant equal rights to women (Ahmad 2023). Similarly, the familial gender hierarchy disadvantages women in all aspects that may empower them (Alkire 2023; De Schutter et al. 2023; Elgin and Elveren 2021). Men's simultaneous exercise of physical, emotional, psychological, and economic control over women reinforces male hegemony and entrenches their socioeconomic dependence on men (Raz-Yurovich and Marx 2019).

Second, findings reveal that human capital is discreetly utilised to favour men in all aspects (Becker 1995). Correspondingly, women are often deprived of the resources that enable autonomy and access to meaningful opportunities (Mihai et al. 2015). Hence, they remain vulnerable in the social and economic landscape of their lives (Ortner 2022). Moreover, because they are considered secondary workers in the public space and natural workers in the private space, their work remains unpaid in the private space and low-paid in the public space, and taken for granted in both spaces (Khan 2020).

Third, in contrast to the capabilities approach, which emphasizes freedom and opportunity (Sen 1995; Nussbaum 2000), our findings indicate that restricted female freedom creates socioeconomic dependence on male family members, undermining women's capabilities, personal growth, and self-actualisation, which are the essentials of social and economic wellbeing. The discrete division of spaces and roles prioritises women's roles as domestic caretakers over their professional pursuits, perpetuating female illiteracy and dependence, and forcing them to live in servitude. The destitution becomes more pronounced in the absence of financial resources that may be utilised for entrepreneurial ventures when decent jobs cannot be secured without education and skills (Amber and Chichaibelu 2023).

Fourth, in line with previous research (Piketty 2020), the findings establish that women enter the labour market due to economic necessity, and their earning is spent on family needs. Therefore, although paid work provides women with some immediate respite, it does not enable them to escape poverty. This aligns with the capitalist ideology to subjugate the proletariat in favor of bourgeois. In this context, the lack of recognition and support for the bulk of women's work in both spaces is part of the capitalist agenda that, in combination with patriarchal norms, assigns reproductive responsibilities to women yet undervalues this work. This situation is further compounded by a pervasive indifference towards women and lack of institutional or social support for them (Amber and Chichaibelu 2023).

Thus, a male-friendly social order is maintained by the systemic suppression of women in all aspects, manifesting male preference and privilege and female suppression and deprivation (Maqsood et al. 2024). Being marginalised in all aspects, women internalise and accept their situation as the natural order. This is no exception in a culture where even the female Prime Minister of the country had to contemplate making her pregnancy public while she was in office (Khan 2018).

Hence, the results highlight that predominant male hegemony in the family structure deters women from actively participating in social and economic activities (Mishra 2018) under security concerns, societal taboos, mobility restrictions, and family responsibilities, leading to low FLFP and feminisation of poverty (Ali et al. 2023). Moreover, although FLFP has the potential to improve women's socioeconomic situation, it does not yield the anticipated outcomes due to the interdependence between women's reproductive and productive work and the lack of support to balance the dual work. Hence, despite LFP, women's dependence on men and their socioeconomic deprivation persist.

Limitations and future research

This qualitative study deals with social practices and contexts rather than individual or personality characteristics in exploring family norms that lead to the feminisation of poverty. Further research is required to explore identity and personal characteristics regarding the phenomenon. Second, the study sample consists of female respondents from the informal sector. Future research may conduct comparative studies with respondents from both sectors and/or with respondents who are not involved in paid work. Third, the study does not cover the voices of men, which may be considered in future research. Fourth, the study takes FLFP in general as a mediating factor in the intersection of gender norms and female poverty. Future research may use sector-specific or industry-specific LFP and replicate the study to compare the results with previous findings. Fifth, although efforts are made for the sample to represent a wide range of the larger population, the generalisability of findings cannot be strongly claimed, which can be handled in the future by conducting a mixed-methods study and extending the sample size. Sixth, future research may replicate the study using mixed methods.

Conclusions

Viewed through the capabilities approach, it can be seen that women in Pakistan are multi-dimensionally poor, lacking access to basic resources and the freedom and opportunities to improve their situation. From the socialist feminist perspective, the findings demonstrate that family norms and gendered division of spaces and tasks support the capitalist-patriarchy nexus in creating and maintaining male supremacy through female exploitation, leading to the feminisation of poverty. Likewise, findings suggest that human capital is not equally utilised due to gender norms, which negatively affects women's choices and chances of productive and decent work as a pathway to escape poverty. Moreover, binary gender compositions create household income disparities by limiting women's intellectual capital and assigning disproportionate domestic work to them in the name of tradition, thereby limiting their ability to accumulate financial and social capital.

Hence, family norms shape women's fates life trajectories by restricting their rights to formal education, professional skills, and economic participation, limiting their capabilities, freedom, mobility, networking, and opportunities, and promoting social expectations that position women as under-confident and submissive. Similarly, partiarchal familial ideologies create enduring power dymamics that entrench female subjugation and dependence across psychological, social and economic spheres, using intergenerational reinforcement mechanisms for transmission of institutional suppression to create intersectionality that adds complexity and deprivation to women's lives.

At the microeconomic level, the familial control and suppression of female identity through constrained freedom, resources, and opportunities impacts women's psychosocial and socioeconomic wellbeing and results in feminisation of poverty. At the macroeconomic level, limited FLFP leads to workforce scarcity, decreased economic productivity, slow economic growth, low GDP, and a limited tax net.

Throughout history, men have predominantly kept hold of the public space by monopolising the positions of power. Hence, societal norms, political agendas, and legal regulations manifest masculine aims and aspirations, exposing women to hierarchical discrimination in both public and private spaces. Therefore, although FLFP is a productive tool in addressing female poverty, it does not provide lasting socioeconomic relief for women.

On a side note, while public and private spaces are divided between men and women, a space that is inclusive of both genders is completely lacking. In this regard, women are additionally deprived because the space allotted to them does not fully belong to them, owing to male domination in all important matters. Therefore, there is no space in which women may exercise autonomy, and in the absence of agency in any space, women remain multidimensionally poor.

Implications and recommendations

The multidisciplinary theoretical approach of this work contributes to the convergence of Economics, Development Studies, Psychology, Sociology, Gender Studies, and Human Resources. By integrating these domains, this research illustrates how economic opportunities – such as human capital development and labour force participation – and social structures, particularly family norms, interact to produce female poverty in complex ways that defy explanation by any single theoretical framework.

By questioning conventional measures of poverty that rely on income and material possessions, this study offers a critical reflection on contemporary approaches to gender and poverty. Moreover, by highlighting the necessity of capacities – such as autonomy, access to resources, and control over financial assets – required to fully engage in the labour market, this study advances the theoretical approach toward a more holistic assessment of poverty.

The microeconomic and macroeconomic implications of the study relate to broader global and regional goals regarding gender equality and intergenerational poverty alleviation as outlined in Agenda 2030. By bridging the gap between socio-cultural research and socioeconomic analysis, the study is relevant to researchers and academics alike. In addition, it provides a comprehensive analytical model for examining the interactions between labour market dynamics and societal norms in comparable global contexts. Moreover, the study is relevant to institutions involved in public policy reforms and implementation, as it draws attention to the impact of family norms on female poverty and calls for a re-evaluation of established norms and the adoption of an inclusive approach to economic development that promotes gender equality.

It is recommended that this research be utilised to educate women about the entanglement of familial exploitation that leads contributes to their systemic poverty. Moreover, in light of the findings, policymakers may employ legislative tools, social welfare initiatives, and financial measures to address female exploitation and poverty and to promote FLFP by challenging the notions of binary gender attributes, roles, and spaces, and the division of resources and labour within the institution of family.

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