

Perception of Working Mothers on Child Development: A Qualitative Study from Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of women in the workforce is imperative for the advancement of every country in the world. In Pakistan the role of women is undergoing dynamic transformation which can have considerable influence on the mother-child relationship and child development. This research attempts to understand the influence of out-of-home maternal employment on the development of child, as perceived by mothers. The study is qualitative in nature using snowball sampling. A total of six working mothers were interviewed from Lahore, Pakistan. Thematic analysis technique has been used to analyze the data. The following themes were identified: (i) Child Neglect; (ii) Strained Child-Parent Relationship; (iii) Child Aggression; (iv) Low Academic Achievement; and (v) Independence and Sense of Responsibility. The study concludes that working mothers need family and employer support to ensure child development in Pakistan. Some of the key reforms that are needed include respect for women's triple role in society and employment benefits for working mothers.

Keywords: Working mother, child development, Pakistan, qualitative

INTRODUCTION

Across time, man is perceived as the breadwinner of the family and woman as the caretaker. Women are expected to stay at home and take responsibility for all the household and childcare duties. In countries like Pakistan, which uphold a patriarchal mindset, women have not been allowed to work outside the house. However, without women's inclusion in the workforce and economy, the development of the country is not possible (Rehman & Azam, 2012; Kossek & Lee, 2021). This may be the reason why in the past few decades, working women outside the home have increased in Pakistan (Sadaquat, 2011). Yet, there is great concern across Pakistani society that by entering the workforce, women will be unable to simultaneously manage household duties and childcare (Ramos & Tuss, 2020). It is also feared that working mothers will contribute to child neglect and underdevelopment of child.

Low female labor participation

The resistance to mothers entering the workforce is found across most societies of the world (Newman & Nelson, 2021). The primary reason is the need for women to remain at home for childcare (Schochet, 2019). The role of a mother becomes critical due to her natural inclination and the emotions she feels for a child. It is the mother that the family depends on to provide time and socialization to the children, which has a lasting impact on the personality development and cognitive health of the child (Singh, 2019).

Overall, the trend of having one male breadwinner and a housewife in each house has declined over previous centuries (Janssens, 1997). There has been an increase in female labor force participation globally; though the rate is not as high in developing countries compared to the developed world. In addition, the rate of growth of female labor participation has not increased as much as expected. The World Development Report (2012) reveals that the rate of female labor force participation in the world rose only from 50.2 to 51.8 percent from 1980 to 2008. According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics report (2018), 57.0 percent

of all women participated in the labor force in 2017 in the USA. This was slightly above the 56.8 percent who participated in 2016, but still 3 percentage points below the peak of 60.0 percent in 1999. Women participation in workforce in developed countries like Canada and France ranges from 45-48% (Verick, 2018).

According to the World Economic Forum, Denmark has the greatest percentage of mothers in work- more than 80% women aged 15-64 years with at least one child (Oliver, 2017). Other countries of the world which have significant female representation in the workforce mostly lie in sub-Saharan Africa; with Zimbabwe, Malawi, Gambia, Liberia, and Tanzania having more between 50.6% to 52.0% of female labor participation in the workforce (Oliver, 2017). However, most of the working women in the developing world belong to the informal sector of employment and are engaged in agricultural work, which has low pay and no employment benefits.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, women experienced unprecedented job losses across the world. One study of employment and income trends in six countries- China, Italy, Japan, South Korea, the United Kingdom, and the United States- found that women are 24% more likely to permanently lose their jobs compared to men (Dang & Nguyen, 2020). On the other hand, it is challenging for working mothers to balance their career, motherhood, and household responsibilities by having to work from the home. Despite some difficulties, some working mothers consider work from home as an opportunity to spend more time with their children (Sevencan, 2021).

More recently, studies have found a positive relationship between fertility and women's employment (Ortiz & Tzvetkova, 2017). It has been contended that countries with better social policies experience higher female employment as well as higher fertility (Brewster & Rindfuss, 2000). Research also highlights that the labor force participation rate of the following women groups is high: (i) women with children under 18 years, and (ii)

single, widowed or divorced women (AAUW, 2021; US Bureau of Labor Statistics Report, 2018). This is because such women need to work outside the home as they are the only income earning members of the family and are in need of the finances. Ultimately, cultural and financial factors play a significant role in the choice of women to work outside the home.

Working mothers and child development

According to the Periodic Survey of Fellows American Academy of Pediatrics Division of Child Health Research, children need full attention from birth to early pre-school age (Earls & Hay, 2006). Huston and Aronson (2005) confirm that the time a mother spends with her child during infancy is critical for child's development. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2003) found that children of working mothers do not get good grades in secondary school exams. Children of full-time working mothers also suffer 28 percent more psychological stress and in adult years it has been found that 9 percent of them remain unemployed (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2003). A study by the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth showed that the duration of mother's job directly affects the lingual development and academic achievement of the child (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1999). Though problems with lingual development did not increase with the passage of time, they did continue to exist (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1999).

Globally, there is dissent on whether mothers should pursue a career outside the home or focus on their household responsibilities. Many argue that employment outside the home has benefits of personality development, social awareness and financial stability for women (Cerrato & Cifre, 2018). However, others argue that by working outside the home, mothers deny their children from cognitive development and nurturing. Scholars agree that the first four to five years are imperative for the development of a child's personality and health (Winston & Chicot, 2016). Those children who receive proper attention from mothers at a

young age are known to have better relations with parents and experience better child development overall (Landry, 2014).

Studies show that children share the strongest relationship with their mothers and depend on them for a healthy environment within the home (Aeri & Jain, 2017). However, women can be affected by several challenges which make it difficult for them to provide the best environment for their child. The predicaments they face are lack of freedom to pursue their careers, financial limitations, and excessive role burden which leaves them with little energy for optimal child care (Almani, Abro, & Mugheri, 2012). Any challenge faced by the mother, be it health, financial or social, can have detrimental effects on the development of the child (Almani, Abro, & Mugheri, 2012). Some research suggests that children of working mothers may become more isolated, aggressive or suffer from emotional instability (Almani, Abro, & Mugheri, 2012). Other research argues that there can be a positive impact of working mothers on their young children, such as assuming more responsibility and valuing the limited time they have with their mother (Quaye, 2011).

Research from the United States reports a directly proportional relationship between maternal employment and child Body Mass Index (BMI), which is an important measure of child's health (Lee & Kim, 2020). Anderson and colleagues (2011) also found that a positive relation between BMI and maternal employment is not just restricted to USA, but can also be found in Germany, Australia and Canada. However, the relation between maternal employment and child BMI is reported as negative by some researchers in Pakistan (Pradeilles et al, 2019).

Contrarily, other research reports that children with working parents scored higher on intelligence tests (Gershaw, 1988). Another study also confirmed that children of working mothers fare better in terms of stress and personality behavior compared to children with non-working mothers (Gershaw, 1988). In addition, the children did not have beliefs related to

gender stereotyping, specifically daughters with working mothers. In one study the Bayley Mental Scale was used to make a distinction between the cognitive development of toddlers, aged 24–36 months, of working and non-working mothers (Meherali, Karmaliani & Asad, 2011). Results showed that there was no relationship between maternal employment status and toddlers' cognitive development.

Another research suggests that as more educated mothers participate in work outside the home, the literacy and skill development of women has a constructive impact on the cognitive development of child (Naqvi & Shahnaz 2002). Educated mothers are more aware and can provide a home environment which gives cognitive stimulation to their children (Andrade et al., 2005). Hoffman and colleagues (1999) contend that living in extended and joint families helps working mothers. They studied the everyday family life of African American, Mexican American and Arab American children. They found that children stayed with their extended kin after returning from school. The mothers could rely on their relatives to take care of their children and do household chores. In some cases, grandmothers lived in the same house, cooked meals for the entire family and the grandfather drove children to and from schools. Other studies also found that when mothers were employed, husbands contributed more in domestic work and children helped more in the housework (Horwood et al, 2021).

Pakistan Background

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the representation of women in the workforce of Pakistan increased from 13.2% in 1990 to 22.35% in 2017 (The World Bank, 2017). Yet, Pakistan is one of the countries in the world with the lowest female representation in the workforce, with only 22.9% of females working out of the home (Dahir, 2017; Asian Development Bank Policy Brief, 2016). The Pakistan Bureau of Statistics (2018) reported that men in the country are about three to four times more likely than women to be employed,

which is one of the main causes of gender inequity. At the same time, Pakistan is a developing country where women play a significant role in both the domestic and public sphere across the country. Women's role in the country include three major spheres of responsibility: (i) childrearing and domestic work, (ii) out-of home employment, and (iii) care and duties for the family, in-laws, extended relatives and the community (Abbas et al., 2021).

In many cases, it is difficult for women to manage all their roles and decide whether to stay at home and look after the children or engage in paid work outside the home. In Pakistan, working mothers are also facing several challenges since the coronavirus pandemic. Difficulties in maintaining work-life balance, stress of losing jobs, transferring to home-based work, and managing children while working from the home have all contributed to the burden on working mothers (Kalsoom, 2021; Ali & Ullah, 2021, Horwood 2021). At the same time, women still face cultural pressure about exclusive responsibility for child development and childcare.

In Pakistan's context, women have little or no control over their earnings and cannot direct their earnings to the wellbeing of their child or themselves. In many cases women cannot direct their finances towards their children, and their work participation outside the home has negative association with the development of the child (Glick, 2002). In fact, in Pakistan employment statistics of women can actually be reflective of informal work and low wage jobs, which does not support women's empowerment for spending on child.

Theoretical Framework

The lens through which this study is viewed is Piaget's theory of cognitive development. In Piaget's view, early cognitive development involves processes based upon actions which later progress into changes in mental operations (Santrock, 2008). Though a child's intellectual ability is based on both genes and environment, Piaget argues that the genetics of the child is less pivotal since it cannot be changed, and that the environment can be changed to suit child

development needs. Parents, and especially the mother, can increase the abilities of their child through environmental factors and the socialization process (Santrock, 2008). According to Piaget's, stages of cognitive development, child development in the early years is highly dependent on parental attention and time (Santrock, 2008). During the initial years with the mother, the child thinks abstractly and develops an ability to make rational decisions about observable phenomena (Cherry, 2018).

Aim of the study

Gender roles in Pakistani society are undergoing a transformation due to the economic pressures that compel women to participate in paid employment outside the home. In a society where women are expected to fulfill their triple role, it is important to attempt to investigate the influence of mothers' employment on their child's development. The aim of this study is to qualitatively explore the perceptions of out-of-home working mothers regarding the influence of their employment on the development of their child. In this way, we will also be able to comment on the quality of social and employment support needed by employed mothers with respect to childcare centers and maternity policies in Pakistan.

METHODS

Ethics

Ethical clearance for this study was taken from Departmental Research Committee (DRC) at former Department of Gender Studies, University of Management Technology (UMT).

Research design

A qualitative design was used in order to help in interpreting the participant's experiences and interpret hidden meanings (Bryman, 2008). A qualitative approach was also considered suitable so that participants could share their unrestricted responses. Smith (2008) argues that

even a small number of participants in qualitative research can help to understand the experiences of select participants.

Population and sample size

The study population included full-time, out-of-home working mothers of Lahore who have at least one school-going child currently living with them. Mothers were approached through snowball sampling in order to satisfy the specific selection criterion (Kamarudin, 2013).

Data collection

In-depth interviews were conducted in person by the first author of this study from March 2019 till July 2020. Each interview lasted between 20 to 25 minutes. A semi structured interview guide was developed based on the literature. The main broad question included: 'Do you believe that your work participation influences your child's development, specifically- cognitive, emotional, and social development?'

RESULTS

A total of five themes were identified with respect to the influence of out-of-home work participation on child development. Of these five themes, four were negative, including: (i) Child Neglect; (ii) Strained Child-Parent Relationship; (iii) Child Aggression; and (iv) Low Academic Achievement. However, findings also revealed one positive theme: (v) Independence and Sense of Responsibility in children.

Demographic characteristics of participants

For this study, information about the participants interviewed is summarized in Table 1. The participants' age groups range from 28 years to 35 years. All of the mothers have either one child or two children. All are either Undergraduate or Postgraduate degree holders, whereas one holds a PhD degree. In this way, our sample is reflective of the highly educated working mothers of Pakistani society.

Table 1:
Information about participants

Participant	Age (years)	Number of Children	Current employment	Education
A	28	2	Administrator	Graduate
B	35	1	Professor	Doctorate
C	34	1	Manufacturing/Industrial	Graduate
D	30	2	School Teacher	Graduate
E	31	2	School Teacher	Graduate
F	30	2	Administrator	Graduate

Child Neglect

Findings revealed that many mothers felt that their child suffered from neglect due to their participation in out-of-home paid work. Mothers mentioned that it was financial need that compelled them to work outside their home and neglect their child. Such women were unable to maintain a work-home balance and also suffered from extreme guilt for not spending time with their children. One of the participants, a single mother, shared (Participant D):

My husband left me three years back and married one of his colleagues. I am a mother to two young boys aged 3 and 5, who now solely rely on me. Initially, my father supported us. However, after his retirement, I decided to step out of the house and earn to support my family. At times, I do feel guilty for not being there for my children. I also feel that my absence will affect their development negatively and that they are severely neglected... but I have no other option, as I am the sole bread earner in the family. I am afraid of what will happen in the future with regard to my child's stability.

Strained Child-Parent Relationship

The interviews revealed that out-of-home employment of both mother and father caused strained relationship between the child and parent. Long working hours, excessive workload, and employment pressures created stress in parents and contributed to yelling and frustration in the home. One of the participants shared that since COVID-19 the workplace had become even more stressful, contributing to the strain on child-parent relationship (Participant C):

We have all suffered through COVID-19. Both my husband and I are associated with the educational sector and we were on the verge of losing our jobs. We were allocated more work since the pandemic by the employer, which at times has been extremely difficult to handle. The domestic burden also increased during the pandemic. We have little time to spend with my daughter which made her cranky. Both of us (parents) have been yelling at our daughter during online classes. We had no other resort to handle her tantrums and keep her silent. Our extra workload has affected her negatively.

Full-time working mothers spend even less time with their children at home, as they are mostly engaged in house management and sleep when they return home. Participants who worked full-time shared that they were unable to monitor and supervise their child's behavioral changes. One participant shared how her daughter started exhibiting negative behavioral patterns at school due to her long working hours (Participant B):

Six months back, my manager resigned due to her marital issues. This left me in a tight spot, as I had to look after the team and was given the additional responsibility to lead. At times, I used to come home late at night. I was contacted by my daughter's teacher who shared that she was having both academic and social problems at school. When I talked my daughter she complained that my work was more important to me than her. She cried for hours and was not ready to listen to what I had to say. That day I decided that I need to come back early from work to spend quality time with her.

Child Aggression

Mothers also shared that when they did not spend enough time with their children it resulted in contributing to child aggression. The limited time that mother's had with children when they returned home did not help in teaching them corrective values or positive behavior. It was rationalized by some that perhaps child aggression was a plea to seek attention and time. Mothers who were unable to leave work then attempted to either change their family setup or

request relatives, like grandparents, to support their child for more hours of care and supervision. One participant shared (Participant A):

My husband opposed my decision to resume work after my son started going to school. However, I succeeded in convincing him. Soon I realized that my child was developing negative traits due to my absence. We lived in a joint family and he (my son) was becoming aggressive. He began to hit his cousins. He used to hit them often and argued back when I tried to stop him. I convinced my husband to shift to another house and asked my mother to look after my children during my work hours. In just one month, I saw a visible difference in my child's behavior.

Low Academic Achievement

Participants shared that their children have less chance of high academic achievement. Mothers also shared that this was a great source of anxiety and depression for them, and that their children's academic laurels was very important for them. Challenges such as not having time to help or supervise them for studies, homework, or test revision were mentioned. A few mothers mentioned that due to working hours, they were unable to take their children for tuitions either. A participant shared (Participant F):

My office had a daycare center with limited staff to look after the children. Since there is no one to look after my children at home, I am forced to drop them at the center. Even now I visit them several times during the office working hours but I do not have time to help them with homework. The staff at the daycare center is also not qualified to help them in homework or revision. At times my children cry and complain about the other children disturbing them and there being too much noise which prevents them from studying. When we reach home in the evening, it is time to clean and eat and sleep. In this way, my children's grades are falling behind.

Independence and sense of responsibility

Some participants also shared that due to their out-of-home work participation, their children had become more responsible and independent in their actions. They have learned about their

roles at home and fulfill their assigned duties. One participant shared that she found her children to be more mature and independent compared to other children of their age (Participant E):

My daughter (8 years old) completes her homework on her own and does not like me helping her out with little things such as changing her clothes or cleaning her room. During COVID-19, when I was working from home, she understood that I was busy. At times, she used to eat on her own and handled her younger brother, without any complaint or problems. I was surprised to see how mature and independent she is now. She has learnt all this because she sees that I am busy with work and that I need her support and help. If I was not working, I don't think she would be as independent.

DISCUSSION

Working women in Pakistan have to maintain a balance between work and domestic responsibilities. However, as out-of-home work participation increases there is risk to child development. This qualitative study helped us to identify the perception of working mothers from Pakistan about their child's development. All the participants were concerned about their child's emotional and cognitive development. They understood and agreed that the role of a mother in shaping the child's personality and behavioral traits was critical. Global research also confirms that mothers are aware and concerned about their role in child development, especially when their children are young and under 10 years of age (Stephiana and Wisana, 2019).

All the participants complained of facing the triple shift burden and having to balance all three roles of home management, childcare and paid work. Majority of the participants complained of not having enough time or energy to spend with their children after work. Domestic responsibilities, social roles and expectations, and unfavorable working conditions prevent women from attending to the developmental needs of their children. The first theme identified pertained to working mother's belief that their child suffered from neglect. Other

research confirms that when mothers are working outside their home, the children suffer from neglect and there is a negative impact on early development of child (Ordway, 2018).

The second theme identified was related to the strained child-parent relationship due to dual partner work participation. Mothers shared that long work hours and excessive employment pressure post the coronavirus pandemic, contributed to the strain between parent and child. Parents also resorted to yelling at the child in order to prioritize duties related to paid work. Other research has shown that when the child-parent relationship is strained and there is shouting, children suffer from low self-confidence and adoption of negative behavioral traits (Aulakh, 2011). Moreover, children of parents who work for longer hours exhibit negative behaviors, poor cognitive abilities and are more prone to obesity and unhealthy eating habits compared to children whose parents do not work or have flexible working hours (Sozialforschung, 2013).

A third theme that was identified in this study pertained to experiences of child aggression. Mothers reported that out-of-home work participation contributed to aggressive behavior in children, perhaps due to negligence and also as an act of seeking attention. Other local research also corroborates that lack of adequate parenting can be a predictor for aggression and other deviant behavior in children (Batool, 2013). The fourth theme pertained to low academic achievement in children, which contributed to feelings of immense guilt in mothers. It was believed that the long hours at work and limited time at home prevented mothers from helping and supervising their children in academic pursuits. Other scholarship elaborates that mothers feel immense guilt for not spending time with their children or helping them in their academic needs at home (Pelcovitz, 2013; Bishnoi et al., 2020). Some research also indicates that children of working women are more likely to fail their school exams as compared to children of non-working women (UK Essays, 2018).

The fifth and last theme highlighted a positive finding with respect to out-of-home work participation of mothers and their perception about child development. Some participant mothers also shared their belief that working outside the home helped their children to become independent and assume responsibility. Children became more autonomous with respect to managing their home and school duties, without the need of constant attention and supervision of parents, contributing to their maturity. Other research confirms that children of working mothers are more efficient in terms of dealing with real-world challenges and can resolve problems independently (Ordway, 2018).

Limitations

There are some limitations in this study with respect to the small sample size and the qualitative responses. For future studies we recommend a bigger sample and a closed questionnaire design. In addition, this study is limited to the more educated working mothers of Lahore. Future studies also need to sample other cities, rural women populations, and less literate populations who are occupied in out-of-home paid work to understand their experiences about child development from a more holistic perspective. Despite its limitations, this study has its strengths. Apart from the themes discussed above, the study highlights that working women still face problems in continuing their professional aspirations. Challenges faced by working women do not require a revolutionary change, but some simple advancements such as societal acceptance, implementation of women related policies (maternity leaves, day-care services and work from home option), support from family members and husband and counseling.

CONCLUSION

A mother plays an integral role in the social, emotional and cognitive development of her children. Out-of-home paid employment plays a pivotal role in the child's overall

development. Women often do not just have to deal with workplace inequalities but handle domestic toxicity and guilt of not giving quality time to their children. Women also have to pay a greater price to survive in a workplace setting such as long work hours, wage gaps, lack of opportunities to assume leadership roles, and lack of women-related workplace policies. The results of this study imply that unless women are supported by state and society, they will be unable to contribute optimally for child development or in the workforce. In order for both child development and women's wellbeing to be guaranteed there is need for critical reform in the domestic cultural climate and work culture of Pakistan. The key changes that are needed include (i) acceptance and support from family and in-laws, especially the husband, and (ii) employer protection including flexible working hours, maternity leaves, and work from home options, and day-care centers at the workplace.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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Ethics

Ethical clearance for this study was taken from Departmental Research Committee (DRC) at former Department of Gender Studies, University of Management Technology (UMT).

Data sharing and availability statement

Data is available upon email request from the corresponding author.

Author Contributions Statement

The first author reviewed the literature, collected the data, and prepared the manuscript. The second author supervised the study, and reviewed and revised the manuscript. Both authors approved the final version.

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