A Qualitative Study of Women Domestic Workers using Public Transport and the Adoption of Purdah

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to analyze the key issues concerning the mobility of women domestic workers working in Lahore, Pakistan, through a qualitative feminist approach. For data collection, the walking interview method, which entailed walking alongside the participants and asking them questions regarding the study questions. Qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyze the interviews with ten participants**.** The findings reveal that the key deterrent limiting women's mobility includes the extremely patriarchal socio-cultural norms that surround women's lives. Two broad themes were found including: (i) Purdah as an Extension of One's Agency; and (ii) Personal Safety, Cost, and Overcrowded Public Transport. This paper changes the societal implications of *purdah* while also shifting the narrative that surrounds it through the way women participants use *purdah* to extend their very limited agency. The study also helps to shed light on Pakistan's public transit system through the eyes of women domestic workers who view it as a deeply unsafe and uncomfortable mode of traveling within the city.

Keywords: *Purdah*, Public Transportation, Women domestic workers, Patriarchy, Mobility

INTRODUCTION

Mobility of women outside their homes, in Pakistan, is constrained by several social norms and security concerns, these include coming into close contact with unrelated men and the discomfort, social stigma, and fear of harassment. Apart from deterring women's mobility, these social norms also limit their use of public transportation. This, in turn, constrains women's choices regarding their participation in the labor force, continuing their education, or engaging in other independent activities (Sajjad et al., 2017). Overcoming these barriers is particularly difficult for women from underprivileged socio-economic backgrounds who are less likely to be able to afford private transportation to complete their daily errands.

By assigning distinct segments to women in buses and operating women-only buses, Pakistan's government has tried to tackle these women's issues by making some changes in its transport policy. Nevertheless, difficulties continue for the safety and convenience of women in public transportation. One of these very strict social norms is the concept of *purdah*. In Islam, *purdah* simply means that women should cover up their bodies if they must leave their homes for any reason (Amin, 1997). However, in Pakistan, the concept of *purdah* also translates to women being made to stay inside the four walls of their homes (Khan, 1999). If a woman breaks this norm, she becomes an outlier, someone to be frowned upon and criticized, and possibly even a victim of different forms of violence.

The International Labor Organization defines women domestic workers as people who provide personal and household care to their employers (International Labor Organization, 2018). Their occupations and tasks vary across countries. Since domestic help is a highly feminized sector worldwide, (International Labour Organization, 2018) the tasks assigned to women domestic workers in Pakistan are usually cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children.

There are 8.5 million women domestic workers working in Pakistan, most of them are women, and all of them are unskilled laborers (International Labour Organization, 2015). Of these women, 29.1% of those, working in Punjab, go unpaid every year (Pakistan Today, 2019). Women domestic workers are an integral part of the fabric of Pakistani society, yet their voices remain relatively unheard, particularly within the context of academic writing. Whilst there has been a growing body of literature on the lives of women domestic workers in other countries, the journeys these individuals make and the everyday experiences of moving between home and work have been overlooked (Goyette & Chin, 1999; Chang & Groves, 2000; Mkandawire-Valhmu et al., 2009). Nearly every urban household in Pakistan has a *kaam wali maai* (women domestic workers) who comes in every day to do their household chores.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is focused on engaging with existing literature about the difficulties faced by women in Pakistan who work as domestic workers, with emphasis placed on *purdah*, traditional gender roles, and experiences of navigating public spaces. The aim of this literature review, therefore, is to examine the intersections of the existing literature that has been produced in this area of research as a way to contextualize and reflect on the present research. There has been some work done regarding the way the social structures deter women's mobility. However, there is a significant gap in the existing literature when it comes to analyzing and understanding the way religion, class, and social status intersect in the ways women are systematically oppressed in material as well as abstract terms. Women's mobility is therefore under constant attack and suppression from multiple angles. Mobility here refers to the ability to freely move within and through one's society without hindrance (Van Nes & Nguyen, 2009). This

encompasses the physical movement of women as individuals, as well as women's social

position as a demographic group. Essentially, in a country such as Pakistan, religion, patriarchy,

violence against women, and the concept of *purdah* play a significant role in deterring women's

mobility.

Purdah and Patriarchy

Prior research states that there are clearly marked gender roles, both in and outside the house,

and vast gender divides in access to resources of all types (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001). From a

broader perspective, a deeply rooted history of feudal politics founded in inequitable land and

resource distribution (Hafeez, 1998) mixed with a strong dose of Islamic traditionalism has

created very strict class and gender hierarchies (Patel, 1991). However, when examined closely,

men are taught from birth to think of themselves as providers, and conversely, to think of women

as dependents and homemakers (York, 1997; Khan, 1999). *Purdah* is one of the ways in which

this socially and economically constructed hierarchy is maintained. *Purdah*, here relates to the

institutionalized hiding of women's bodies and presences from public life. This idea is enforced

through, both, the overall restriction of women's access to the public sphere by a systemic

insistence that a woman's proper place is at home managing the household and caring for her

family, as well as through the acceptance of the idea that women should cover up their bodies if

they must leave the home for any reason. *Purdah* can, therefore, be seen as a means of explicitly

enforcing the demarcation of social roles on gendered lines by setting a very specific standard for

acceptable women's virtuosity (Amin, 1997). The observance of *purdah* is heavily linked with

the idea of a woman's *izzat* (honor) and that of her closest male relatives, either their husband's

or father's. Her honor is less likely to be violated or disturbed if she keeps to the roles that have

been ascribed to her and specifically if she keeps the *purdah* thereby reinforcing the segregation of the sexes in society (Khan, 1999).

Hannah Papanek (1971) defines *purdah* as "the word most commonly used to describe the system of secluding women and enforcing high standards of female modesty in South Asia, particularly Pakistan and India". *Purdah* overall is linked with Muslim populations in the South Asian region, and variations on the system of *purdah* appear elsewhere in the world. It forms a significant aspect of the lives of many South Asian women and is linked intrinsically to the structure of families in these societies. The segregation along gender lines is instituted and justified by social attitudes about human nature and reinforced by the way public and private spaces are organized. In such societies, women are considered integral to the maintenance of the family unit and simultaneously regarded as being vulnerable to harm when in public spaces (Tarar & Pulla, 2014). *Purdah* also provides a form of symbolic safety to women, particularly when it comes to the sexual and aggressive impulses of men that are considered and regarded as an inevitability in male-dominated and patriarchal Muslim nations (Khan, 1999).

The patriarchal structure of the family gives a man control over the household as he is regarded as its head, thereby exercising authority over all other members of the family. It also includes the reinforcement of women's subjugation which cuts across social, cultural, and religious boundaries (Zaman et al., 2013). In such patriarchal societies, particularly in Pakistan, low levels of development and lower opportunities for education go a long way to inhibiting the ability of many women from participating in public life. This patriarchal control of women goes to great lengths to control them: instituting an extremely restrictive code of behavior, reinforcing very specific forms of family and kinship, and a powerful ideology linking family honor to female virtue (Saikia, 2016). Men are given the responsibility of maintaining the family's honor

through their control over female family members. As Kabeer (1991) noted in Bangladesh, these practices have social and cultural backing which ensures women's dependency on the very system that seeks their subjugation. In contemporary Muslim societies, this systemic control of women's lives is accepted as necessary in part due to the idea of women as a potential source of social *fitna*, that is, disorder or anarchy (Sabbah, 1984).

Harassment in Public Spaces

Grundström (2005) defines public spaces as "those spaces of the cities such as streets, parks, squares, and public buildings that are open to the public and accessible to everyone – as a contrast to private space where access is restricted." In her book "No Country for Women" (2010), Nāsarina, states that public spaces are "areas open and accessible to all individuals, irrespective of who they are. These include streets, public toilets, bus stops, railways stations marketplaces, open parks, water-bodies, public transport, etc". Alamdari et al. (2012) adds the following to this definition "such places are more like an experience rather than a space, so that the results of the social interactions and experiences among different individuals and groups will be getting a sense of collective identity, self-respect, social skills, and promote social participation."

Given this definition and the understanding of public space that can be drawn from it, whenever a woman steps out into a public space, she becomes an object; meant to be observed, evaluated, and commented on by any nearby men (Rosewarne, 2005). Thompson (1994) states that street harassment exists only in the "genuinely public world"; a world where people are strangers to one another. This anonymity increases the chances of street harassment. Street harassment covers a wide range of behaviors, both verbal and non-verbal, therefore proving slippery to define. However, it does have some defining characteristics such as those described

by feminist scholar and litigator, Cynthia Grant Bowman (1993). Within her work she defines

street harassment as having the following characteristics: 1) The target of street harassment is

female; 2) the harassers are male; 3) the harassers are unacquainted with the target; 4) the

encounter takes place face to face; 5) the forum is public, taking place on a street, sidewalk, bus

station, taxi, or other places to which the public generally has access; but 6) the content of the

speech is not intended as public discourse. Rather, the remarks are aimed at the individual

(although the harasser may intend that they be overheard by comrades or passers-by), and they

are meant to be degrading, objectifying, humiliating, and frequently threatening in nature.

Harassment of women in public spaces limits their mobility, and by extension personal freedom.

In fact, harassment in public spaces is a direct violation of women's very basic human rights

(Cranston, 1986; Bowman 1993).

There is very little research conducted on the experiences and challenges faced by

women domestic workers while navigating through public spaces in South Asia. However, there

is a noticeable trend in this region, where women of lower social classes and those that make up

the most vulnerable demographic are told that the only feasible way to not be harassed in public

spaces is to simply avoid them altogether (Viswanath & Mehrotra, 2007). This sort of viewpoint

is not only deeply misogynistic, but also has significant psychological impacts on these women.

Harassment is a means to exclude women from public life, making them feel alienated and

dehumanized. This research will go to show how street harassment has continued to be

trivialized and treated as an inevitability for women who venture into the public sphere, as well

as how it damages the women who face it regularly and how they attempt to deal with it in their

own ways.

Cities around the world are investing vast amounts of money in putting new mass transit systems in place, however, women user's still fear victimization and harassment, which causes inequality in accessibility to public spaces (Adeel et al., 2014). It is exactly for this reason that research needs to be done to study these fears and experiences. While fear of victimization (through crime) affects all users of public transportation, fear of sexual harassment and abuse is a concern that is often unique to women and girls. Additionally, other factors such as their age and sexuality intersect in increasing their chances of victimization, too. This fear plays a massive part in limiting not only women's mobility but their access to other economic opportunities as well. The aforementioned reasons, added to poor information about the availability of buses in Pakistan, lack of adherence to schedules, following governmentally mandated bus routes, and unmarked pickup and drop-off locations only increase women's vulnerability in the country.

METHODOLOGY

A feminist, interpretive qualitative approach has been used for this study. The data collected during qualitative research includes more than words; it involves attitudes, feelings, vocal and facial expressions, and other conducts (Freeman, 2019, Bryman, 2012; Silverman, 2011). The final output of data for this research consisted of interview transcripts. This study combined four processes: collecting data, translation and transcription, coding data, and finally, evaluating data. The qualitative approach encouraged flexibility in the data collection, a phenomenon that is vital for a better understanding of the natural world and cultural context for a specific population group (Silverman, 2011).

Research Questions

This research addresses the following questions.

1. How do women domestic workers usually get to and from work?

2. What deters women domestic workers working in Lahore from using public
   transportation?

3. What role does *Purdah* play in the mobility and choices of women domestic workers
   working in Lahore?

Research Setting

Lahore is the capital city of Punjab, and the second most populous city in the country. For this
research, it is pertinent to mention here that Lahore has a semi-arid climate. Its hottest month is
June, with temperatures routinely exceeding 45 degrees in the summer. In June 2019, the
temperature goes up to 48 degrees centigrade. July is the wettest month, with very heavy
rainfalls due to the monsoon. It is necessary to consider these factors when taking into account
how people move around and negotiate the city.

Transport forms a key concern of this research; therefore, it is important to note the
current systems in Lahore. The main public transportation system is operated by the Lahore
Transport Company (LTC) and Punjab Mass Transit Authority (PMTA). The backbone of the
PTMA is the Lahore Metro Bus Service, as it runs through the middle of the city. Whilst
Lahore's public transportation system is widespread, it is not friendly or accommodating for
women (Joshi, 2019). I mention this here because for this study, women domestic workers were
asked questions about their use of Lahore's public transportation systems, their access to it, and
the troubles they face, on public transportation.

In 2017, the Women Development Department of the Government of Punjab, in
collaboration with UN Women, Aurat Foundation, and Australian Aid produced a report called
'Women's Safety Audit in Public Transport' (2017). This report was based on 1,000 surveys

from women who used public transportation in Lahore daily. This report outlined that Lahore's

bus stations and buses are unsafe and unfriendly for women. The women who use spaces for

commuting faced harassment that was sexual in nature (lewd remarks, obscene gestures, groping,

etc.). This report also stated that it was the first of its kind, implying that there was not enough

data available to make any policy changes or suggestions to limit such lewd behavior.

Sampling and Recruitment

For this project, I utilized my existing personal connections, and therefore employed the method

of snowball sampling. This method is suited to this study because the focus of this study is on a

sensitive issue, concerning a private matter, and thus requires the knowledge of an insider to

locate people for this study. The person I used as the initial point of contact was a woman

domestic worker utilized by my own family. I had spoken to her in person and provided her with

the details of the project. I also gave her a copy of the translated participant information sheet for

her to keep. I also informed her verbally that she had every right not to participate in the project

if she did not want to. Once I provided her with the information related to the project, she

verbally consented to be involved in this study as a participant, and as my initial point of contact.

Through her, I identified three potential participants for this study. They were all women

domestic workers who work in the areas near Mall Road, Lahore. Using this contact and

snowball sampling, I was able to identify more potential participants and recruit 10 participants

through this sampling method. The participants were between the ages of 18 to 60.

I conducted a pilot interview with a woman domestic worker who works for my own

family. It is worth mentioning here that this pilot was conducted as advocated by thinkers such as

Ismail et al. (2018) who suggest that this is an important tool to iron out the project, and to find

and fix any problems that may arise in later interviews. Data from this interview was not

included in the study; rather, it was an orientation exercise, which Biernacki and Waldorf (1981)

state is an important part of the research process. The only problem I faced during this walking

interview was that the temperature that day, at 4:00 pm in Lahore, was 42 degrees centigrade.

This high temperature made it very difficult for me to walk, talk, and record at the same time. To

make sure that the high temperature of the city does not become a liability for me later, I decided

to conduct subsequent interviews either in the morning, from 8:00 am to 10:00 am, or in the

evening, from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm.

Data Collection Method – The Walking Interview

The Go-Along Walking Interview (Carpiano, 2009) combines the regular interview method with

participant observation. This occurs when the researcher accompanies the participant on a

journey that would normally have occurred in the absence of the researcher (Carpiano, 2009).

This is intended to obtain rich data. It is vital that the researcher accompany the participants in

their natural habitat while completing their usual routines at the usual time and day (Kusenbach,

2003). The researcher must ensure that the participant is accompanied and does not interrupt

their routine during the interview. The researcher essentially focuses on the participant when

they are going about their business asking questions and listening carefully (Sheller & Urry,

2006). This interview is similar to the sit-down interview in the sense that it uses the same

template: the interviewer is already prepared with open-ended questions, although environmental

factors may give rise to other questions (Carpiano, 2009). During the walking interview,

especially the go-along interview, it is imperative that the participant make all the decisions. This

involves the time of the day the interviews were conducted, the selected routes, any stops that

need to be made, and other additional elements. This is done to keep the power balance, or

rather, power imbalance, in check, so that the participant feels as if they are as much a part of

this interview and the journey as the researcher (Evans & Jones, 2011). This is also done to

enable the researcher to capture the routine, which is what the method allows.

I chose this method because, when interviewing marginalized communities, researchers

tend to appear better educated and more privileged. As is the case with me. This creates yet

another power imbalance when interviewing socially marginalized individuals. The biggest risk

that can arise from this power imbalance is the fact that the participants can become intimidated

by the researchers during the process of the interview and give the researchers the answers they

think they (researchers) want to hear. Oftentimes, the participants are also afraid of "sounding

stupid" (Bryman, 2012, Adler & Adler, 1987). Walking alongside a participant, compared to the

traditional sit-down interview, is regarded as an inclusive method because it is seen more as

collaboration and reduces power imbalances (Sheller & Urry 2006). It helps participants feel

more at home with the research, because they are being interviewed within a known

geographical location which is a part of their everyday lives (Trell & Van Hoven, 2010). Since

this research aimed to look at the transitions and interactions between and within spaces, and as I

was interviewing women domestic-workers on their way to and from work, walking interviews

were best suited for this study (Butler & Derett, 2014).

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded utilizing my mobile phone, which was kept in my hand and so

within optimum distance for capturing conversation during the interview. Once the interviews

were complete, I transferred all the interview files from my phone to my personal computer,

immediately deleting them from my phone. Once the files were in my computer, they were

stored in a password-protected folder to which only I had access. These files were deleted once

the research project was complete.

Once the interviews had been recorded, I moved on to the translating and transcribing process. Given my command of both languages, I chose to translate the interviews myself, having done so successfully in previous roles and research. I translated the interviews simultaneously to the transcription, doing so to save time and enable optimum organization of the data. For transcribing the interviews, I used the free software called 'InqScribe'. During this process, I uploaded the files to this software, translating these whilst also adding my personal notes to the transcribed files. Once all the interviews were transcribed, I moved on to the analysis process. For this research, I used the process of qualitative thematic analysis to analyze the data (Kleinman, 2007).

Initially, I ensured familiarity with the data by multiple readings of the transcriptions, noting first impressions and looking for meaning, and determining which pieces of data were most relevant to the research aims and objectives. Then, I focused on deeper analysis. In this step, I identified key questions that I wanted to answer through the analysis. The approach I used focuses the analysis on the answers to a particular question or topic, by time period, or by event.

Then, I categorized the data and created a framework. This is often referred to as 'coding' or 'indexing' the data (Bryman, 2012; Silverman, 2011). One of the key components of qualitative analysis is the process of coding. Coding is a system of indexing that enables one to sort one's data (Bryman, 2012). A code is simply a conceptual label that is written alongside sections of data that describes an 'incident' (Clark et al., 2019; Bryman, 2016). These might include characteristics, events, actions, attitudes, phrases, people, attributions, or explanations. Codes are shorthand to label, separate, compile, and organize one's data. (Bryman, 2016). I started by identifying themes or patterns that consisted of ideas, concepts, behaviors,

interactions, phrases, etc. I then assigned a "code" to those pieces of data to label the data and make it easier to organize and retrieve.

Once the initial coding was completed, I moved on to the process of analysis and interpretation. There are several ways of analyzing and interpreting one's data. I employed the method of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was suited to the study because it encompasses a wide array of research topics, from those about people's experiences, for instance, women's mobility in public spaces, to people's understanding of the construction of certain phenomena in certain contexts. Additionally, it works well with data sets of all sizes and can work with both data-driven and theory-driven analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Once the data was coded, I began identifying themes. Thematic analysis requires the researcher to compare and contrast emergent codes and make interconnections between them (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This allows for the elaboration of the properties of a named theme.

RESULTS

From the data, the following two broad themes were found: (i) Purdah as an Extension of One's Agency; and (ii) Personal Safety, Cost, and Overcrowded Public Transport.

Purdah as an Extension of One's Agency

Purdah, as mentioned earlier, is more strictly enforced in the lower classes of the Pakistani Muslim household (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001; Haque, 2015). It is often deemed to be used as a tool to control and subordinate women (Kabeer, 1991). However, the interviews I conducted changed my understanding of *purdah* as a phenomenon entirely. Speaking from my own lived experiences, as someone who has grown up in a patriarchal society and has been conditioned to view *purdah* in a way that hinders women's mobility, I never thought it would become an

extension of agency for women from a certain (extremely underprivileged) section of the

Pakistani society.

When walking with the participants, I asked what prompted them to observe *purdah*.

Their answers never varied. This was exemplified in the following excerpts taken from the

walking interviews I conducted. The first case of Participant 1 here is interesting as she notes

that observing *purdah* is protective:

> I wear a *Chaddar* (a large piece of cloth that is draped over the body and head) on top of my
>
> shalwar kameez and dupatta… *Chaddars* are large and they cover a large portion of my body. I
>
> can cover myself with it so no one else can see my body. If I go out in just a dupatta, everyone is
>
> going to look at me *gandi nazar say* (in a lecherous way). Therefore, I wear a chaddar so that no
>
> man will look at me. [Participant 1]

Within this example, it is evident that the notion of the *purdah* described both within

literature and popular imagination varied drastically from women's lived experiences. This was

echoed by Participant 2, where she said the following:

> When I am in my *Abaya* (a loose robe that covers from head to toe and is stitched and thus
>
> comparatively not an open cloth like the *Chaddar*)*;* men don't look at me in that way
>
> (lecherously). If I go out in a Chaddar or a dupatta, I feel like I'm wearing nothing at all, and that
>
> during movement some body parts can be revealed, like the feet and ankles. I feel naked without
>
> the *Abaya*.

Based on the experience of Participant 2, it is possible to see how the concept of *purdah*, through

the wearing of the *Abaya* (a loose-fitting full-length robe worn by some Muslim women), can be

liberating for some women, allowing them the relative comfort of feeling safe from unwanted

advances as they traverse public life. In the case of Participant 2, it is a fundamental aspect of her

being able to work and take part in public life at all. However, the abaya is not always a clear-cut

symbol of empowerment for women, this aligns with Dr. Riffat Haque's (2010) work, who notes

that, "…the combination of the visible and invisible forms of *Purdah* create an interconnected

web of deprivation, marginalization, and denial - not only of women's rights for self-

improvement, but also of their roles as agents of change." This can be seen in the case of

Participant 3, where she said the following:

> I go out in my *Dupatta* (a scarf). I can't wear an *Abaya*, I find it suffocating, especially in this
>
> heat. I never really wore an *Abaya,* to begin with. Usually, I wear a *Dupatta*, but whenever I'm
>
> visiting my in-laws, I wear a *Chaddar* as well. But this place I worked at before I got married, had
>
> a very specific dress code. It was kind of like a uniform. So, I used to wear an *Abaya* over my
>
> uniform, and then I'd take it off when I got to work. My uniform was Western in nature, so to
>
> shelter myself from strange men (the male gaze), I wore an *Abaya* over my uniform. I mean,
>
> considering the area we live in, people talk, and they say *gandi bataina* (rude things), so that was
>
> another reason, too.

These three excerpts viewed together allow us to look at the deterrents to women's

mobility. They allow us to posit that the actual barriers to women's mobility here are mental, not

physical barriers as indicated in the previous work including that of Ayesha Khan (1999) which

states that for underprivileged women, education, and lack of exposure to the outside world

makes navigating through public spaces and traveling independently difficult. This research

points to the contrary. The women I interviewed explicitly stated that while their lack of

education and exposure to the outside world was detrimental to their mobility in the early days of

their working lives, it never became a problem later. These were mental barriers they worked on

and surpassed. However, physical barriers to their mobility, such as high prices of their preferred

mode of transportation or being in close quarters with unknown men who may or may not

sexually harass them were circumstances beyond their control, circumstances that still (somewhat) scare them. Similarly, one such circumstance that is beyond their control is the concept of *purdah* which, as I have mentioned before, is deeply embedded in the socio-cultural and religious norms of Pakistan.

Previous research exploring the lives and experiences of women has argued that the concept of *purdah*, right from its very conception, has been sexist in its entirety (Durrant & Sathar, 2000). However, when faced with a phenomenon that presented itself as exclusionary and as a deterrent, it is only commendable that Pakistani women found a way to counter it. The women that I interviewed, took an archaic and sexist concept, and used it to extend their very limited agency. What we see here is not women who are deterred by a set of ideas or a piece of clothing but women who are strong and brave and powerful; women who went through the worst possible conditions and came out stronger and made something of themselves. I will be exploring this point further below.

Personal Safety, Cost, and Overcrowded Public Transport.

It has been well-documented that women's fear of using public transportation causes them to modify their travel behavior (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2008; Schulz & Gilbert, 1996). Adeel and colleagues (2014) analyzed the 2007 Time Use Survey to assess Pakistani women's use of public transportation and what held them back from using public transportation. Through their study, they found that women in Pakistan, as a whole, were less mobile than men, with their travel patterns being significantly more complicated, their trips being shorter and oriented to household-related tasks, and not related to leisurely activities at all. The study attempted to ask the following questions: Why do women take such short trips? What scares them? Why is it that

they are not as mobile as men? Why do they not use public transportation as much? If they do, is there anything that particularly concerns them?

When I interviewed the participants about their traveling patterns, they did not think my questions were significant at first. To them, going out only when needed (for grocery shopping, to work, to the hospital, etc.), making short trips, and in some cases always being accompanied by someone, was entirely ordinary. For instance, when asked if she always left her house, whether it was for work, grocery shopping, meeting relatives, or just for leisure time, accompanied by someone, Participant 1 explained that she only traveled with her husband due to fear for safety:

> Usually, my husband comes with me. I don't go out alone that much due to fear for my safety. Most of the time I go with my husband. We always go grocery shopping together. I never go out alone.

Focusing specifically on their preferences, I asked all the women that I interviewed about which modes of transportation they liked the most. All ten of them said they preferred to use the rickshaw because it was safe, but they could not do it daily because it was also too expensive, so they decided to stick with the bus services. When questioned about her commute to and from work, Participant 2 elaborated on the issues of expensive public transport in the country:

> I walk to work alone, by myself. A rickshaw costs 50 rupees and I can't afford to pay that every day.

Similarly, Participant 3 echoed the same sentiment, about expensive public transport, and how though the *rickshaw* (three-wheeled passenger vehicle) was safer, it was also more costly than the public bus Participant 3 explained:

I prefer the *rickshaw*, but when there is less money, I take the bus. It all depends on the influx of

income. If the influx is more, then I'll end up using the rickshaw more, but if the influx is low, I'll

end up using the buses and wagons.

Exploring more deeply as to why they did not like the public transportation system, I asked

participants some questions regarding the bus services available in Lahore that they used the

most. I used the following probing questions: Was it the local wagons, the LTC buses, the

Speedo bus service, or the Metro bus service? Which one did they use most frequently? Which

one did they like and disliked the most? And what was their biggest concern being alone, as

women, on a bus full of men? In answer to my questions, Participant 4 clarified:

Local buses are really congested, you can hardly breathe in them. There is never any place to sit

down, everyone is just really packed in. It makes me very uncomfortable. Sitting down next to

unrelated men makes me very uncomfortable, I don't like that at all. And you have to sit down in

the LTC (Lahore Transport Company) coaches, too. I don't like those coaches. I feel suffocated in

them. I can't breathe when I sit in them. Everyone is packed in so tightly. Your arms and legs are

touching the arms and legs of the person sitting next to you. It is very uncomfortable.

There is no separate space designated for women in those coaches. Men and women sit next to

each other and that is why I like the metro bus. There is a separate section for women on every

single bus. There is allotted space for women at the front of the bus, and men must stay at the

back. If you're sitting tightly packed in a group of women, that's okay, but with me, sitting like

that with men is unacceptable.

The biggest complaint of Participant 4 while using public transportation was frequently coming

in close contact with unrelated men, and the threat of potentially getting harassed. Viswanath &

Mehrotra (2007) in their study of Public Spaces in Delhi talk about how Southeast Asian society

places the onus of protecting a woman's honor entirely on her. They state that if a woman is

harassed or abused (in a public space) in any way, the responsibility and blame for inciting the

incident ultimately falls on her. The fears of Participant 4 of being in close quarters with men

stems from this norm as well. Similarly, when I asked Participant 2 about her concerns when she

used public transportation, she responded:

> My experiences with local wagons have been terrible. There aren't separate seats for men and
>
> women in there, so you just have to deal with it. You sit next to men, and you get through it. But I
>
> try not to use it. I avoid it as much as I can. The wagons are so small and so crowded. When I am
>
> in them, I feel like I can't breathe. And there are so many men in there, it is awful. I am a religious
>
> woman and being in such close contact with *Na-Mehram* (men who are not your relatives) men is
>
> something I find very hard to do, but when I have no other choice, I do it anyway.

Later in the interview when asked about the Metro bus service and the 'pink transportation'

targeted exclusively for women travelers, and if women had had any trouble using it, Participant

2 shared:

> No, none. The metro bus and the pink transport system are very good. I especially liked the fact that there's
>
> a separate women's section on the metro bus. You don't have to sit squished between men.

DISCUSSION

This research paper sought to shed light on the key issues concerning the mobility of women

domestic workers in Lahore, Pakistan, while they are on their way to and from work. Through

the use of walking interviews, along with insider knowledge and observation, and rigorous

thematic analysis, the major deterrents found in women's mobility in Lahore, Pakistan, were the

strict patriarchal socio-cultural norms that governed women's lives in every conceivable way

possible. This study is able to extend Aurat Foundation's (2012) research which tackled gender

differences, understanding, and perceptions (with respect to women's access to public spaces) by providing us insights into the lived experiences of these women and their everyday lives. This research essentially does the same by providing us with a glimpse into what a woman is thinking before and after she gets on public transportation and the myriad of factors that go into what mode of transportation she chooses and why she chooses it.

The objective of this research was to identify and analyze the key concerns that had to do with the mobility of women working as women domestic workers in Lahore while they navigated public spaces on an individual basis, providing context for broader social realities and how these women place themselves within Pakistani society. Furthermore, this research also builds on Dunckel-Graglia (2013) work. I would like to mention here that this study was pivotal in shaping this research and the way I looked at women's global perception of public spaces. In 2013, Dunckel-Graglia conducted a study called "Women-Only Transportation: How "Pink" Public Transportation Changes Public Perception of Women's Mobility" in Mexico City that assessed the need for women's only transportation and why such transportation was necessary. This was a mixed methods study that surveyed 125 women. It was found out that the women who participated in this study believed that their gender attracted violence during their daily commutes, and until this situation was changed, women were to be given their own transit alternative. More than 50 percent of the women who participated in this study reported that they always take women-only transit. Additionally, according to this study, since public transit is very fast-paced, men saw this as an opportunity to be aggressive towards women without any repercussions.

The findings of this study address the socio-cultural norms and values influencing women's choices during public transport, primarily focusing on the concept of *purdah*. It is a

fact that *purdah* is seen as an inherently sexist concept (Papanek, 1971; Hakim & Aziz, 1999; Tarar & Pulla; 2014). However, as clarified through this paper, when faced with a phenomenon that presented itself as exclusionary and as a deterrent to their mobility, it is only commendable that Pakistani women found a way to counter it. The women that I interviewed, took an archaic and sexist concept, and used it to extend their very limited agency. What we see here is not women who are deterred by a set of ideas or a piece of clothing but women who are strong and brave and powerful, women who face the worst possible conditions but have still found a way to emerge stronger and enter public spaces through the protection of *purdah*.

Additionally, this research subverted the (somewhat) archaic understanding of traditional gender roles to a certain degree. The household hierarchy of the women I interviewed was very different from the one described in popular academic discourse (Fafchamps & Quisumbing, 2003). All of the women I interviewed stated that they started working after they had gotten married because their husbands simply could not provide for them. This research suggests that these women did not start working because they wanted agency or because they wanted to traverse patriarchal boundaries for personal fulfillment, but because they saw their children starving or suffering due to limited household finance, and thus they decided to step out and do something on their own. In doing so, they defied traditional gender roles, and enter public spaces and the workforce.

In terms of women's mobility and their use of public transportation, the women I interviewed preferred to choose the metro bus or 'pink transportation', i.e., buses with separate seating spaces for men and women. This is because if we look at this phenomenon from an intersectional perspective, we must understand that when an underprivileged woman, who has been restricted by her gender, religion, and the enforcement of *Purdah* for most of her life gets

on a bus, she risks such instances of harassment and the subsequent shifting of blame for harassment onto herself. It is therefore hardly surprising that these women would prefer the relative safety of women's only spaces on public transportation, in this case, the women's only compartments of the metro bus and the speedo bus services in Lahore.

The women I interviewed chose the metro bus and the speedo bus over local wagons and LTC buses because these buses had separate seating spaces for women. Alluding to previously mentioned excerpts, we know that these women feel very uncomfortable being in close quarters with men. This shows that women who use public transportation, consciously decide to choose those services that have separate seating spaces for women due to threats to personal safety. Additionally, if we look at this phenomenon from an intersectional perspective, we must understand that when an underprivileged woman, who has been restricted by her gender, religion, and the enforcement of *Purdah* for most of her life gets on a bus, she risks such instances of harassment and the subsequent shifting of blame for harassment onto herself. It is therefore hardly surprising that these women would prefer the relative safety of women's only spaces on public transportation, in this case, the women's only compartments of the metro bus and the speedo bus services in Lahore. Finally, women who had the money and finances chose to opt for secluded *rickshaws* as the most preferred option to travel.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this research is the small sample size. Another limitation is that this research focuses on women domestic workers in Lahore, in one urban area of Lahore, and so the findings may not necessarily apply to all of Pakistan. Therefore, if future research is to be conducted on a topic similar to the one addressed in this paper, it would need to be conducted on

a much larger scale, with a much larger sample size, to accommodate the needs of women from

deeply underprivileged sections of Pakistani society.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The walking interview method is an excellent method to use when interviewing sensitive

subjects because it neutralizes the power imbalance between the interviewer and the interviewee.

I say this because the women I interviewed made a lot of (rude) comments about me, the

research materials, and my appearance (hair, earrings, clothes, tattoo) while I was conducting the

interviews, which I think could not have been possible if the same interviews had taken place in

a formal setting. This could also be attributed to the fact that the women I interviewed felt more

comfortable with me because I was interviewing them in spaces, they were already familiar with.

This qualitative study has important implications for Pakistani society and the management of

public transport. The role of *purdah* as a symbol of protection and guardianship for women in

Pakistan is clear, especially in public spaces and the absence of male family members, and

solitary travel. Given the culture of patriarchy, there is a need for more investment in subsidized

female transport in the country.

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This is to certify that to the best of the researcher's knowledge; the content of this research
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Author Contributions Statement

SJ conceptualized the study, collected the data, analyzed the data, and prepared the manuscript in collaboration.

Data sharing and availability statement

Data is available from the author based on request.

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