

Lived Experiences of Work-life Balance in Women Academics during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Living in lockdown proved a novel experience for the global population. This happened for the first time in recent human history due to the COVID-19 outbreak. As yet, less is known about how families have managed under social isolation. Working mothers, who typically worked for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, were burdened more and faced numerous challenges. Social distancing, coupled with online schooling, was a major challenge for these working mothers. This study documents the lived experiences of Pakistani working mothers, to explore issues of work-life balance during lockdown by using a phenomenological framework and the theoretical lens of "performative action" and the "second shift". The study results reveal that the persistent gender role compartmentalization appeared in its more complex form during COVID-19. The situation was further worsened due to the economic backlash families were confronting during the pandemic. Socially assigned roles of women as an 'Ideal mother' and 'Ideal wife' in the domestic sphere, and an 'Ideal worker' in the professional sphere created role conflict for women. The findings of this study will help to develop gender-responsive policies to address the implications of the pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Working Mothers, Remote Working, Domestic Life, Second Shift

INTRODUCTION

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, almost every sphere of life has been affected badly. At the time of writing this research, the World Health Organization (2023) reported that there were more than 601,189,435 confirmed COVID-19 cases worldwide, resulting in more than 6.4 million deaths. One of the earliest global responses to combatting COVID-19 was mainly based on an approach related to physical distancing and lockdown. Education was severely disrupted because of the closure of daycare facilities, schools, and universities. The world opted for a “work from home” and “online education” model to continue educational activities (Alon et al., 2020). This model interrupted the traditional family life’s support mechanisms, led to the transfer of childcare back into the house, and increased the domestic workload of women (Wenham et al., 2020).

A rapidly expanding body of social science research has emerged to analyze the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on social inequalities (Carli, 2020; Kantamneni, 2020). Both the short-term and long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic are gendered. The COVID-19 pandemic proved to be particularly difficult for women. Nearly 60% of women worldwide work in precarious informal employment, earn 16% less than their male coworkers due to the gender wage gap, and 25% are more likely than men to live in poverty (UN Women, 2021). These financial weaknesses are gender-specific. Women, compared to men, make less money, save less money, have fewer stable jobs, and are more likely to work in the informal sector. Women are also more likely to be the primary breadwinners in single-parent households, have less access to social protection, and are less able to handle economic shocks.

Gender differences in academia are well-known (Minello, Martucci, & Manzo, 2021). In comparison with their male colleagues and spouses, female academics usually have less free time and more domestic responsibilities (Fetterolf & Rudman, 2014; Sutor et al., 2001; Ward

& Wolf-Wendel, 2004). They have to do gender-based unpaid work such as cleaning, childcare, and housework, in addition to their academic work such as lecturing, publishing articles, and attending conferences (Günçavdi et al., 2017). Consequently, women publish less, achieve higher positions less frequently, and have more interrupted careers (Minello Martucci & Manzo, 2021).

Academic scholarship demonstrates that COVID-19 has disproportionate effects on women academics (Gao & Sai, 2020). The pandemic has made it difficult for women academics to combine demands of academic positions with the increased demand for family responsibilities such as cooking, cleaning, caring for the elderly and children, and caring for children's schooling (Champeaux et al., 2020). While working from home, women, as "good mothers", have fallen back from their research commitments due to the needs of children and domestic work (Yildirim & Eslen-Ziya, 2021).

With a population of more than 241 million people, Pakistan is the fifth most populated country in the world and the second most populated Muslim country (Worldometer, 2023). Pakistan is one of the countries which were hit hardest by the pandemic. More than 1.5 million COVID-19 cases were confirmed, and more than 30,000 people died due to the disease (WHO, 2023). Following other countries, Pakistan imposed its first lockdown in March 2020 (Mahmood, Jafree & Qureshi, 2022). The imposed lockdown brought unprecedented changes to work and family life, particularly for working women. As a traditional patriarchal society, men determine the very existence of women as the head of the family, whereas domestic work is the primary responsibility of women. Lockdown and social distancing meant that working mothers who had some relief through assistance of maids had to do more household work during the pandemic.

Women are encouraged to enter the teaching profession based on biological differences between men and women, as well as on moral and cultural considerations. It is believed that

women naturally take care of children. Women are also considered more suitable for school teaching because it is compatible with their domestic role (Ullah & Skelton, 2013). Teaching allows women to work in the public sphere without violating cultural boundaries. Being a primary or secondary teacher, they can easily internalize traditional gender roles and perform their domestic responsibilities. Besides the favorable situation for women to join primary and secondary teaching as a profession, they have very limited chances to join higher education institutions (HEIs) as academics.

HEIs are still male-dominated workplaces full of challenges for women academics (Bhatti & Ali, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly hindered Pakistani women's academic achievement and their dedication to career advancement. Women have struggled a lot to balance their participation in both work and family roles and to deal with the work-family conflict (Ali & Ullah, 2021). This study aims to uncover the challenges women academicians faced during the pandemic in managing their work-life balance and how these challenges affected their lives.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During the lockdown, gender differences in domestic work saw changes, with women's share increasing more than before the lockdown (Van Tienoven et al, 2023). This happened in the form of increased childcare, home tutoring, and housekeeping. Women also bore the brunt of the online workload, with having to manage their work and their children's schooling online (Deshpande, 2022). Evidence shows that women who performed most of the domestic work suffered in the context of mental well-being (Craig & Churchill, 2021; Thibaut & van Wijngaarden-Cremers, 2020). Although men's share in domestic work increased, they took on comparatively "pleasant" tasks such as grocery shopping. This task allocation reinforced

men as the providers and women as nurturers, bearing the burden of care provision within the home (Biroli et al., 2021; De Paz et al, 2020).

Coupled with the effects of school closures, family tensions disturbed stability at home (Calvano, 2021). Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya (2021) noted a similar trend in men and women working in academia. Mothers in academia were forced to bear the burden of the ‘good mother cultural ideal’ and thus had fallen back on their research commitments. In households with dual incomes and children, women ended up tending to the children and domestic work for most of their time. In addition, working women tried to become ‘superwomen’ during lockdowns to handle most of the domestic labor without seeking any help from their partners or spouses, male members of the house, or domestic servants (Venkataraman, 2021).

Studies showed that women faced challenges brought by increased cognitive load due to school closures, increased chores, and pressure of the ‘superwoman’ myth (Kaur & Sharma, 2020; Deshpande, 2022). Apart from the home, the work environment saw increased gender discrimination, with managers choosing to keep women out of the departmental loop by quoting their household responsibilities. Many women remained under the pressure of imminent unemployment (Yavorsky, Qian & Sargent, 2022), so they had to simultaneously manage the stress and politics in the workplace, along with the increased burden of home and child care. To make matters more difficult, mothers’ paid work hours decreased considerably during the lockdown period, reducing their purchasing power. Women were significantly more likely than males to lose their jobs, and those who did keep their jobs were more likely to work from home (Zamarro, 2021).

For productivity and learning, the quality of time spent at work is critical. Multitasking and interruptions are two major productivity killers at work. Champeaux and colleagues (2020) reemphasized that gendered division of the labor remained persistent during the lockdown. The traditional female work such as cooking or laundry remained the

responsibility of women. Male presence at home was thus not helpful for working mothers, but it had a significant effect on the well-being of children (Champeaux et al., 2020; Mangiavacchi, Piccoli & Pieroni, 2021).

Studies also looked at the increased number of men attending to household during lockdown as positive trends (Alon et al., 2020). In some two-parent households, mothers quit their jobs to become stay-at-home parents and handle childrearing while their spouses worked full time (Ammerman & Groysberg, 2022; Thompson, 2022). This security of income was not a possibility for single mothers. In cases where both spouses worked full time, the women still showed up to 4 more hours of childcare per day in comparison to their male spouses. All in all, women took care of most childcare responsibilities despite their status: homemaker, currently married and working, or single and working (Chung et al., 2020). Also, women showed higher levels of anxiety, depression, stress, and mental drainage than men, and mothers showed a higher percentage of mild to severe anxiety in comparison with childless women (Benassi et al., 2020).

Early in the crisis, psychological suffering grew dramatically, and a new gap in psychological suffering appeared between mothers and women without school-age children in the families (Clemente-Suárez et al, 2021; Biroli et al., 2021; Bluedorn et al., 2023). Increased childcare obligations are linked to a reduction in working hours and a higher likelihood of leaving the workforce during the pandemic. Since then, the difference between mothers of school-aged children and non-mothers narrowed, while the psychological distress difference between mothers and fathers widened (Biroli et al., 2021; Ceulemans et al., 2021). In dual-parent homes, decisions on whether to stay in paid work or engage in unpaid labor were part of everyday household bargaining, with women being the preferred choice to leave jobs. According to researchers Bluedorn and colleagues (2023), the pandemic appears to have worsened gender inequality in both paid and unpaid employment.

THEORETICAL LENS

Performative action

Butler in her study (1999) proposes that gender is “performative” which means that notions related to gender are socially construed through both speeches and other forms of non-verbal communication, used to define as well as maintain gender identities. Butler asserted that repetitiveness of acts was an integral part of being performative which means carrying out some particular acts again and again like a “ritualized production” (Ton, 2018). Through the lens of the theory of performative action by Judith Butler (1999), the researchers explored how women maintained a work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic and what were the challenges that were faced in family spaces.

Performative understanding of gender roles and their stereotypical representation is a significant area of discussion in the post COVID-19 times. To understand the ongoing transition, it is important to carefully study the prevalent gender roles in society as well as the associated and additional set of responsibilities attached with each gender. Gender roles define human experiences and the ways they shape the overall edifice of society. The theory of performativity can help in understanding the behavior and attitudes that constitute gender roles as well as the structures that define how gender must function in any society. The need of the hour is to deconstruct these narratives and view things through a postmodernist lens to better understand how different discourses are shaping gender realities, particularly for women.

Second Shift

Hochschild and colleagues (1989) in their research study investigated households and identified how women were largely responsible for domestic, childcare, and work responsibilities. They called this unpaid work at home as the second shift. It is because

women must do all household chores after coming back from paid work, that they are forced to perform two duties in comparison to men who only perform one (Van Gorp, 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, women had to perform both duties simultaneously. So, by using the theory of second shift, the researchers' explored how women performed dual roles including childcare and household duties along with work responsibilities through remote work during lockdown.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study aimed to explore the lived experiences of women academicians about their work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question of the study was philosophically grounded in the interpretivist paradigm (Mason, 2017).

Sampling

Through purposive sampling technique, six women academicians who were mothers and working from home during lockdown were recruited as the study participants. An in-depth interview guide was used as a tool of data collection.

Ethics

All ethical considerations were top priority during all phases of the study. The study was first approved by the institutional review board of University of Management and Technology (First author's place of employment at the time of starting research project). Disclosure about the study along with informed consent and voluntary participation of the study participants was assured. Confidentiality of the data was maintained (Mason, 2017). With the consent of study participants interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed.

Data Collection

Data was collected online through telephonic interviews and the duration of each interview was 45-60 minutes.

Data Analysis

Verbatim transcripts were prepared at first. From the verbatim transcripts initial codes were identified. All similar codes were grouped under similar themes. Results were presented under different themes after the completion of thematic analysis process (Lochmiller, 2021). To assure the trustworthiness of the research, the tool was developed in the light of existing theory and literature. Similarly, triangulation of data was assured through interviews, personal observation, and cross-validation of the results and findings with the study participants (Adler, 2022).

RESULTS

The demographic profile of women participants of this study is shared below in Table 1. Whereas four were married, two were either divorced or single mothers. Two were Lecturers, and four were of the rank of Assistant Professor. All the women academicians in the sample taught in the Social Science faculties.

Table 1:
Demographic information of study participants

Participants	Age	Marital Status	Children	Job Title
Participant 1	34	Married	2	Assistant Professor of Sociology
Participant 2	34	Married	1	Assistant Professor of Art Education
Participant 3	39	Divorced/ Single Mother	1	Assistant Professor of Education
Participant 4	45	Married	5	Assistant Professor of Gender Studies
Participant 5	32	Divorced/Single Mother	1	Lecturer of Business Studies
Participant 6	36	Married	2	Lecturer of Human Resource Management

Using the theoretical lens of two theories, i.e., the second shift and theory of performative action, the following eight themes were extracted from the collected data: Impact of COVID-

19 on gender roles; Gender realities; Gendered division of labour; An ideal worker; An ideal mother; Dual responsibility; Stalled revolution; and Online education of children and technological mess.

Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Roles

Most of the participants confirmed that gender roles in COVID-19 remained unchanged

Participant 1 stated that:

“Majority of my female co-workers were bearing double responsibilities. They were managing household chores and children, along with dealing with stressful university workload. However, on the contrary my male colleagues were not facing any such issue, as they were just managing their work duties.”

There is a lot of difference if a man is working from home or a woman is working from home. Participant 5 shared:

“My father was working from home. He had a separate place where no one could go. On the contrary, me and my sister who were working from home had to carry laptops even in the kitchen as there was no domestic help available and we had to do all the chores ourselves. If you are a woman and are at home, you are supposed to do all the chores, even if it’s your working hours.”

The burden of managing young children while working online was a challenge for mothers, but not fathers. Participant 6 shared:

“My son, who is 6 years old wanted my attention as I was home and it was kind of okay to disturb a mother working from home because again no work that a woman does is significant and important, but you cannot disturb a father who is working from home because whatever men do is important and serious.”

Participant 2, despite her pregnancy and newborn baby had to fulfil her domestic and work-related responsibilities. She stated:

“It was stressful to work during my pregnancy. However, I tried to cope with the increasing pressure and stress by taking things one at a time. There were times when I had no energy to work and hence, I had to push myself to give my best or do the necessary, if possible.”

Participant 4 asserted that the pandemic redefined gender roles and helped men understand how women tackle multiple roles simultaneously. According to her:

“I think gender roles were redefined during the pandemic. Men started accommodating their wives as well as helping them out in domestic and childcare responsibilities and it showed that there is a bit of appreciation and acknowledgment for the double and triple shift I made before the pandemic, and this has renewed my spirit altogether.”

Participant 5, who is a single mother shared that for the first-time male members had a first-hand experience of how women maintain home and work-life balance. She shared:

“One of my brothers started doing little things like making tea while the rest of the men in the family did not do anything at all.”

Participant 6 has 2 children and she birthed her younger daughter during the pandemic. She had spent all of her pregnancy in pandemic times and had also lost her mother while she was in a vulnerable place i.e., in the seventh month of her pregnancy. Nonetheless, the gender roles did not change much. She had the support of family during this time, yet she had to keep on doing household chores like cooking:

“I had to show that I am sharing the burden, and also that I can do it, so why not!”

Gender Realities

Most participants shared that gender realities are fixed, with men being considered heads of household, and women expected to work for the maintenance of the house and children, and that this reality did not change during the pandemic. Participant 4 also agreed that men are raised in patriarchal settings and are not taught to contribute in domestic affairs:

“My husband has been raised in a setting, where men helping their women in the kitchen or looking after children is not acceptable. He used to share some burden by helping children with their homework or assisting them in taking online classes, however, he never helped me with other responsibilities.”

Participant 2 argued that her husband was helpful, however, her immediate family were unable to digest the two of them dividing their set of responsibilities. She said,

“My husband was pretty helpful and accommodating. But the people around expected me to work and manage domestic affairs. We still live in a societal setting, where husbands helping their wives is frowned upon.”

Gendered division of labor

Participants described the gendered division of labor during the pandemic. Participant 1 argued that during the lockdown, she was responsible for handling domestic and work responsibilities, along with looking after her COVID-19 positive family members. Participant 1 said:

“When I was taking classes from home, I was also COVID-19 Positive. All my family members, including my husband, mother and sister were also quarantined at home. We had no domestic help and hence I used to manage both domestic and university work simultaneously. I used to wake up early and make breakfast, before sitting for my online classes. My sister was looking after my children, however, after classes I used to video call her and help her out with homework. The idea was to spend some quality time with her, so she won't feel lonely.”

Participant 3 stated:

“During the pandemic, I was extremely sick and contracted a liver infection. I was unable to carry out my work responsibilities. Despite going through this rough patch, I was responsible to multitask at home. I used to get up early, prepare breakfast, look after my daughter and complete other house chores, before sitting for my classes. However, on contrary, I believe my male co-workers had less challenges as they were responsible for work alone, with little or no domestic responsibilities.”

An Ideal Worker

Despite managing both domestic and work-related responsibilities, working women also suffered an added fear of losing their job. Several companies were reportedly laying-off their female employees, to survive the economic crunch, increasing the stress levels and building fear about job loss in women. Participant 1 stated:

“I experienced a level of uncertainty during the pandemic, as there were rumors that the majority of employees will be laid off by the university.”

Participant 6 also agreed that several women lost their jobs during the pandemic. She said:

“I believe more women faced job threats during the pandemic. We live in a culture, where men are responsible to look after their family and hence it was easy for the organizations to terminate female employees. I came across multiple stories, where women struggled more in comparison to men during the pandemic. Men can work in a range of settings such as at shops, can give tuitions and even handle meagre roles. However, women have limitations set forth by society.”

Participant 3 shared that her organization was not offering any additional incentives such as pay raises during the pandemic. She said:

“There was no pay raise by my organization. Also, I was facing a threat for my survival during the pandemic. I had fewer publications due to different marital problems that led to divorce in the end. In the academic sector people with more publications win and hence for me it was more like a “survival of the fittest”. Being a single mother, I was worried about being laid off by my organization. People who were good at politics had more chances of surviving, so I felt threatened.”

Participant 4 argued that economic instability and job security was a major concern for male working class only. She said:

“In comparison to women, men were facing more threats of being laid off during the pandemic. Even men having their own business setups were struggling both within the country and abroad. Some women were laid-off in the education sector due to the economic crunch. I faced no threat of being laid off during the pandemic, so job security was not an issue. However, my organization delayed our payments for two months.”

An Ideal Mother

Participants also described the challenge and burden on women to be the ideal mother.

Participant 2 felt an added pressure after the birth of her first child. She said:

“I faced psychological and emotional issues during the pandemic. I had a newborn baby that I wanted to take out but couldn't due to increased pressure of catching the virus. It is easier to go to work than to

manage work from home. However, staying at home was a much more viable option for me, as I had to look after my baby and I didn't want to take him along to work.”

Participant 4 stated:

“I believe my responsibilities multiplied during the pandemic. My domestic help was not there to help me, and my children and husband were at home as well. At times it was difficult to manage the household chores and my work responsibilities together. I also had to assist my children in their online studies. Unfortunately, men in our society do not contribute to domestic responsibilities, however, my husband tried his best to help my children in their studies.”

Dual responsibility

All the participants expressed their concerns of performing dual responsibilities during the pandemic. Participant 3 said:

“Unfortunately, no one was understanding that we were working from home. It was not different from the males of our family. We were carrying out work responsibilities as well. However, our families treated us differently.”

She also complained of an added pressure from her organization:

“I was working 24/7 during the pandemic. Our working hours were not defined, and we were bombarded with instructions, workshops, and seminars, along with an additional pressure of being readily available for students.”

Participant 2 shared her experience of managing work from home as well:

“I believe when you are at work, you are a hundred percent cut off from your domestic responsibilities. However, when you are at home you are distracted due to other activities. You have to multi-task which can be stressful and challenging at times.”

Stalled Revolution

All the participants agreed that a ‘no definite working hours’ policy by organizations during the pandemic added extra pressure on women, who were already performing tasks of their first and second shifts simultaneously. Participant 1 said:

“The working hours during the pandemic were indefinite. It was more than 8 to 10 hours. I was obligated to be responsive to any urgent query on the WhatsApp groups. The work hour boundaries were blurred during the lockdown, as before the pandemic, I was responsible to work during office hours only. The experience of interacting with students on WhatsApp was terrible altogether. Moreover, no flexibility was given to faculty members in terms of result submission and other core responsibilities.”

Participant 2 said:

“I am meant to work five days a week, however, this I only on paper. I was working all day during the pandemic, inclusive of the weekend. Not only this, I was obligated to be available 24/7, as I was working from home. Working hours stretched all over the day, making it difficult to take equal time for other activities as well.”

Participant 4 asserted that initially, it was difficult for her to work from home and manage the workload. She stated:

“During the pandemic, I faced several challenges, due to the transition of my home into a workplace. The overall workload increased as well. The working hours extended from 8 hours to almost 12 hours. Moreover, there were no weekends.”

Participant 5 shared:

“To some extent, my organization helped me in managing the transition. We were given instructions related to the Google Meet application, how to tackle online classes and manage other digital tools. But they never provided us with the internet or a laptop to make things easier.”

The transition from physical classes to online medium was a big challenge for Participant 4 as well. She said:

“I had to check papers online, download Zoom recordings and carry out an additional set of responsibilities. Students were also not satisfied with the online teaching practices. Also, managing work from home in a small space can be a tedious task. Incoming noise can be distractive at times.”

Participant 3 faced no issues in managing the transition from physical to online platforms.

She said:

“I had no issues while interacting with students, as I was already conducting online lectures and workshops for them. I was familiar with zoom and was proficient in interacting with students through online mediums. However, I struggled due to the input of my students during online classes. We were not acknowledged for

all the hard work we were putting in. I believe teachers were struggling more due to the shift in pedagogical practices.”

Both single mothers who have a daughter, Participant 3 and Participant 5, shared that they were living with their parents and they had to take care of their child. Participant 5 shared:

“I don’t want to be a burden on my parents so I am working, though I know that they can easily manage the economic burden of me and my daughter.”

But when her parents suffered from COVID-19, and also when she herself had COVID-19, the organization she was working in did not give her leave. Instead, she had to work from home. Participant 3 has old parents and when the whole family became sick with COVID-19, she had to take care of her parents, do household chores, take care of her child and also work from home. She shared:

“Even at that time, the organization I work in did not give me leave, instead they said that I can work from home. It was a most terrible time.”

Online education of children and technological mess

Working mothers who had to supervise children taking their classes from home, faced the greatest challenges. Participant 5 shared:

“I learned Zoom for my workplace, but my child’s school was using Google Meet. So, I as a mother was supposed to be proficient in using both platforms.”

There were working mothers who were not that educated and could not handle technology properly. Participant 6 shared:

“I witnessed mothers screaming during parent teacher meetings. They demanded that they should be considered as humans. Learning to use technology and then getting children’s work completed, along with doing our own work and household chores is nearly impossible. Yet we did it all.”

Participant 4 shared:

“Once class was done and my child had completed her work, we had to upload the work online and take photos of it and send it to the teacher. We were time bound for this and had to do it within the assigned

time. They expected a child of Class 1 to be able to do all this themselves. This was not possible. Basically, they wanted the mothers to help the children non-stop during online schooling.”

The interview data showed that schools expected working mothers to be totally free, to be proficient enough to use technology, and to be available to help the children all the time for online schooling.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to uncover the challenges women academicians faced during the pandemic in managing their work-life balance and how these challenges affected their lives. The findings showed that COVID-19 had a significant effect on dynamics of gender relations, however, gender roles in COVID-19 remained unchanged, particularly in transitional and developing societies like Pakistan. Besides the availability of husbands at homes during the lockdown, women were still single-handedly managing responsibilities of domestic affairs, along with their professional responsibilities. These findings align with global research (Tienoven et al, 2023; Boring & Moroni, 2023).

In Pakistani society, gender realities are construed through placement of gender roles in everyday lives as well as the social conditioning that passes from one generation to another. These gender realities did not change during the pandemic and previous research also indicates how the male members are seen as the providers of family, even when women are also working, resulting in ideas/ideation of women's subordination for maintaining the status quo that is an integral part of society (van der Vegt & Kleinberg, 2020; Aleksanyan & Weinman, 2022). Findings showed that most of the women who were working from home were looking after house-hold chores and men who were working from home, were not contributing much. So, the prevalent pattern of housework remained the same.

The theoretical lens of performativity is thus endorsed, in that the performance of house-hold chores by women has become a reality in itself, so women are expected to

perform them, no matter what the circumstances may be. Understanding the gendered division of labor and gender roles indicates how working women handled both domestic and professional responsibilities side by side during the pandemic (Andrew et al., 2022). Women are always expected to maintain a work-life balance, and on top of it, also face glass ceiling in their work-life (Salahuddin, Mahmood & Ahmad, 2022), so in the case of lockdown due to the pandemic, this situation worsened. The need increased for women to maintain a striking balance between their personal and professional lives, and this also caused unwarranted psychological pressure on women. The second shift continued in a more complex way during the pandemic.

Our findings showed that in the work realm, an ideal employee is one who is not constrained at the hands of family commitments and is flexible in his/her mobility. This means that women with household responsibilities are easily excluded from the marketplace and streamed into child-rearing and domestic responsibilities. Women academicians were continuously threatened about losing their jobs or losing benefits as there were threats of downsizing because of the worsening economic situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that the idealized notions of motherhood and the commitment of women towards their work were seen as a clash, along with posing significant challenges to women's gender realities. Our findings resonate with the super-woman myth as cited in review of literature (Venkataraman, 2021; Kaur & Sharma, 2020; Deshpande, 2022).

Women usually face great burden to be the ideal mother. Hays (1996) asserted that society believes that a "good mother" is the one who sacrifices her own interests to look after her children. Due to this requirement of taking care of children, the elderly and the sick, women are often responsible for combining their work and caring responsibilities. This forces them to choose between work and family or they must redefine this good mother ideology by combining both motherhood and professional responsibilities. A mother is responsible for

spending her time, energy, and finances to look after her children and household. She is also required to give her undivided attention to meet the physical, emotional, and intellectual developmental needs of her children (Lim, 2012). To stay as an ideal mother and an ideal professional, who can cope with the challenges of remote work during the pandemic lockdown, resulted in a negative impact on the mental health and well-being of women. All interviewees of this study asserted this.

Also, particularly in the Pakistani context, men are used to spending time in the public sphere, but during COVID-19, they were confined in the four walls of the house. This meant that women, as partners, were expected to perform an additional role of a counsellor to their husbands, so that men could adjust in their new situation. As indicated in the review of literature, care work has always been seen as the primary responsibility of women, so women were looking after the sick during the pandemic as well, and they were thus at a greater risk of catching the virus and getting sick. Also, before the pandemic, women were following a fixed schedule and had ample time for children and themselves. However, with the closure of educational institutes, they were forced to perform an extra responsibility of helping their children to get used to the online learning mechanisms. In the majority of the cases, they had to sit with their children to train them well in this model of schooling. The findings of a study by Del Boca and her colleagues (2020) also highlighted how women were forced to perform additional domestic and childcare responsibilities during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Jasrotia and Meena (2021) in their study found that almost 76 percent of participants had domestic help before the pandemic. However, after the lockdown, they were forced to manage their household on their own. The majority of participants in our study complained that it was stressful to manage work from home during the pandemic, without the help of their partners and other family members. This second shift is influenced by certain factors including social standing, ethnicity, family configuration, and socio-economic factors. A

clear disparity is visible between the working hours of both mothers and fathers, however, Craig (2007) in his study claims that the average workload of both males and females is quite similar to one another, after counting both the paid and unpaid work hours. This means that a dual burden does exist for women in the form of domestic and paid work responsibilities (Butler, 1988).

Despite rapid changes in the world around us, men are still considered as slow changers as they have failed to ease the strain of their partner. This stalled revolution emerges when society fails to adapt to changing times and accommodate working women. This leads to an inevitable second shift, where women are forced to suffer due their uncooperative workplaces as well as unchanging gender norms in the society they dwell in. Horrschild and colleagues (1989) assert that workplaces should be more accommodating and should allow parents to work part-time, have flexible work hours and have the option to take parental leaves at the birth of their child or even to tend to a sick child. In a similar pattern, our data shows that remote work during COVID-19, on one hand, augmented women academicians' input, efforts, and fatigue due to constantly trying to balance remote work and household chores.

If we take just one example, previously mothers had to come back home and do their second shift, which included supervision of children in their homework. During lockdown, the school hours and the homework from school were happening in the same space. This led to the presence of mothers' support during the educational hours of school as well. They were also making sure that children attend classes in a disciplinary manner, that they were actually signing into their classrooms, keeping an eye on them during online instruction, uploading and downloading their school material, and also trying to understand what was being taught so that they could help the children later on. Women had to manage all this during the

pandemic, while they were also working remotely for their own jobs and also suffering from threat of job loss and financial problems (Shehzadi, Rubab & Jabeen et al., 2022).

Limitations

The study focused on work-life balance in the face of the pandemic of women academics in Lahore, Pakistan. While this specificity lent itself well for an in-depth investigation in this domain, its applicability for women in other professions in Pakistan is limited at best, particularly those employed in healthcare and finance – both professions that did not undergo similar work-from-home transitions and were in fact overburdened in case of the former. Additionally, the sample size was small and cannot be generalized for the wider population.

CONCLUSION

The current study investigated the lived experiences of women academics regarding work-life balance during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the findings of the study, persistent gender role compartmentalization appeared in a more complex form during COVID-19. During the pandemic, traditional housekeeping work for women academicians became more difficult. The situation was exacerbated further by the economic backlash that families faced during the pandemic. The transition from physical academic work to online learning posed an additional challenge for women academicians. The findings of this study reveal a severe form of gender role constraint among women academicians. Butler's "theory of performativity" is consistent with the study's findings. Women faced role conflict as a result of their socially assigned roles as "ideal mothers" and "ideal wives" at home and "ideal workers" at work. The pandemic, as an emergency, made these existing hierarchies explicit and further solidified them. Women also experienced psychological distress because of the role burden. Based on the findings of the study, it is proposed that gender roles need to be radically reformed in Pakistan. This is possible if early socialization like the family unit and

educational system promotes balanced gender roles in society. It is also recommended that working mothers be supported in the community and by employers through counselling and monitoring for mental health wellbeing.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Funding

This research has not received funding.

Ethics and Permission

The present study was approved by the institutional review board of University of Management and Technology

Author Contributions Statement

AS reviewed the literature, collected and analyzed the data and wrote the manuscript. QKM and IR contributed to writing the manuscript. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Data sharing and availability statement

Data is available from the corresponding author based on request.

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