



Navigating Women's Empowerment in the Global Era: Intra-gender Competition among Pakistani Working Women through Internalized Patriarchal Masculinity and Fractured Sisterhood

Dr. Saima Khan*

*Assistant Professor and Head of Global Studies Department, Government College University, Lahore, Email: saima.khan@gcu.edu.pk

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Corresponding Author:

Dr. Saima Khan,
Assistant Professor and Head of Global Studies Department, Government College University, Lahore, Email: saima.khan@gcu.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates female-to-female power dynamics in male-dominated workplace environments of Pakistan. Thus, challenging the global rhetoric that surrounds female empowerment as defined by global feminism and neoliberal development. By employing ethnographic methodology, I collected the data through in-depth interviews of interlocutors conducted during my PhD research and field notes of participant observation from three gender-sensitivity training workshops I conducted with government employees in various sectors. I have explored with this data how women working within the male-dominating government workplace navigate authority and legitimacy. The study finds that women use the internalization of patriarchal masculinity to gain access to authority, legitimacy, and social capital within the hierarchy of bureaucracy. Through this analysis, the study identifies new emergent femininities resulting from the dual forces of internalized masculinity and selective adoption of feminine care ethics. These emergent femininities are characterized by women adopting masculine behaviour as a means to create opportunities for themselves within the institutional hierarchy. At the same time, by perpetuating Patriarchy through their own choices, women create additional forms of inequality between female workers. As a result, two groups of women emerge, the first are empowered women with internalized masculinity who often view themselves as self-made women or saviours of other female workers. However, the other group of working women has care-oriented responsibilities at home are often excluded from access to power. The theoretical framework of this paper is built on Kandiyoti's concept of "patriarchal bargains" and Bourdieu's theory of social capital. The paper demonstrates that toxic masculinity permeates women's everyday behaviour through their own practices within male-dominated organizations. This paper further demonstrates the

ways women have internalized patriarchal masculine notions of empowerment at workplace undermine feminine perspectives of empowerment built on ethics of care. It explores practices through the lens of three themes **a)** women bargaining patriarchy to gain power position at workplace as a social capital; **b)** different needs of women with care-giving roles and their ways of becoming empowered and accumulating social capital vary from the women who either do not have these obligations or do not choose to have these responsibilities; **c)** Lastly, the priorities of women who prioritize or have only office-based duties to perform conflict with the ideals of some women with feminine responsibilities related to domesticated duties.

Introduction: Empowerment Discourse in the Global Era

Globally, it is argued that the notions of women empowerment are derived from the discourses on women rights emerging from the narratives of neoliberal development, and Western white feminism. Empowerment, in a neoliberal paradigm, is an approach through which women succeed individually instead of focusing on collective achievements based on socio-structural factors. Resultantly, women's progress is deemed as an exceptional case that leads to individualism, masks equality, and disregards collective action to transform society (Bennett 2024). Notwithstanding the fact, Western White feminists' debates emphasize on the concept of 'sisterhood', which is originated in second wave feminism by Kathie Sarachild. This term depicts solidarity between women, shared lived realities of women, and positive bonding between women (Bartlett A. 2022). Similarly, in neoliberal discourses, women of Global South are mostly considered as a monolithic category with homogenous needs. However, women empowerment in neoliberal paradigm, rests on the economic notion of empowerment drawing upon paid and unpaid labour of women (Wilson 2015; Acosta-Belén and Bose 1990). This connotation shows contrast in the needs and understanding of women who carry out paid work and those who perform unpaid work. Moreover, this definition of empowerment depicts shift in the homogenous meaning of empowerment by underscoring individual's autonomy over collective liberation, which is generally accessible to women of superior social hierarchy at workplace (D'silva and Hakoköngäs 2022). This modification demands a critical analysis about how working women, especially those who have internalized masculinity, navigate through the patriarchal social norms by reinforcing them instead of abolishing these patriarchal masculine values (Akgul 2017; Ade 2021). My study in this paper engages with the everyday lived experience of the working women of Pakistan to investigate the ways women have internalized patriarchal masculinity to maintain their authority at workplace. This paper will focus on how these women with patriarchal masculine attributes restrict collective empowerment by constraining decision-making power of other women with pronounced feminine qualities (Zuma 2018). I will highlight a clear dichotomy between women who prioritize office-based tasks through internalized masculinity and those who adhere to caregiving roles, resulting in tensions and power asymmetries among women themselves. To study this phenomenon, I have employed Kandiyohi's concept of 'Patriarchal Bargain' and Bourdieu's concept of 'Social Capital'. This paper will demonstrate how women who have internalized patriarchal masculine notions of empowerment at workplace undermine feminine perspectives of empowerment built on ethics of care. I will further explore this practice through the following three themes are focus of this paper, **a)** how women bargain patriarchy to gain power position at workplace as a social capital; **b)** the ways some women with caregiving roles have different needs and their ways of becoming

empowered and preserving their social capital vary from the women who either do not have these obligations or do not choose to have these responsibilities; c) how priorities of women who prioritize or have only office-based duties to perform conflict with the ideals of some women with feminine responsibilities related to domesticated duties.

Setting the Scene: Intra-gender Dynamics among Pakistani Women

“Now-a-day women do not have issues of empowerment or discrimination at workplaces; they are aware how to defend them. Women who choose to work know are vocal enough for their rights, and they understand, to work outside their homes, they have to leave behind their domestic issues. I have failed to understand the reason for conducting these gender sensitivity workshops.” (29-year-old Female Participant, Gender-Sensitivity Workshop Participant)

This was a reflection shared by one of the female participants of the ‘gender-sensitivity’ workshop, which I conducted for the government and semi-government employees. She openly questioned the relevance of the workshop, for in her opinion, discrimination against working women in government and semi-government sector is not operational in this contemporary age. Several male participants supported her view, while some participants, including men and especially women, chose to remain silent on this expression. In Pakistani Government Offices, the workplace is mostly male-oriented, governed by patriarchal norms, for women adjust themselves to attain power and to fit in the system. Therefore, any reflection ignoring the concerns that are specific to women was considered correct by the men. However, another female participant gathered her courage to disagree with the woman who shared her ideas previously. She explained that despite advancement in Pakistani society, organizational prejudices against women at workplace persist both at the inter-gender as well as at the intra-gender level. Her reflection unveiled the fact that the organizational policies and practices that hinder women’s empowerment are because of inequalities instigated by globally prevailing discrimination against women along with the discrimination triggered by existing socio-cultural inequalities. Moreover, she shared, women who have the responsibilities of care related to their family members often lack the space to voice their needs, despite they intend to work genuinely with diligence. She further added, male colleagues, but more excruciatingly, female colleagues, expect women, with responsibilities of care for family members, to leave their emotional labour behind while they are at the workplace. This situation of compromising for their rights is shaped by the inter-gender and intra-gender competition, which denies the lived realities of women with feminine duties. Thus, they feel disempowered despite being educated, employed, and economically independent. In the context of above discussion, this paper attempts to comprehend the social practices of Pakistani working women and the intra-gender relations between these women within the recent cultural landscape of employability.

Methodology

Drawing on field notes, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, this paper has employed ethnographic methodology. Primarily this paper is result of the data I gained from four of the workshops, I conducted on ‘Gender Sensitivity’ in Lahore in the year between 2021 to 2024. The participants of this workshop were Government Officers from the government or were semi-government organizations of two provinces, KPK and Punjab. These organizations have patriarchal, despite many of the women are employed in these institutions. After conducting each workshop, I took field notes to analyse the conversations, and opinions of the participants that took place during the workshop. Later, I compared these reflections with the In-depth interviews I conducted during my PhD research from 2017 to 2020, with my working women as interlocutors, to explore how empowered they get through education and employability. This assisted me in analysing intra-gender relations between the working women in Pakistan when some internalize masculinity as a social capital to gain power. Moreover, this analysis assisted in comprehending how global narratives of women’s

empowerment intersect and conflict with local experiences of Pakistani women. The respondents of the interviews, and participants observed in workshop were working women of middle age from 28 years to 40 years old.

The conversations of participant and respondent women were analysed thoroughly to divide them into groups for better examination of their conversations. I observed two types of women according to their needs, the first who were dedicated to the duties of care for their family members at home and the other kind did not have or did not choose to carry these responsibilities. Of the first kind, many were married with responsibilities of child and house care, and some despite being unmarried had duties to take care of their parents. This group demanded their feminine responsibilities at home to be recognized, for it will assist them in better performance at workplace. The second kind of women were those who chose to stay unmarried or opted not to have children to avoid duties of domestic care. The focus of these women was to adjust at place of work according to the rules of the workplace, which are patriarchal, therefore, the relied on patriarchal bargain. The conversations recorded in the interviews were transcribed, these transcripts of the interviews as a data source (Moschkovich 2019) were systematically analysed. The conversations of the participants of workshop were recorded as field notes to gain specific knowledge about an identified problem (Higginbottom et al. 2013). From the conversations of these women, and interviews of interlocutors, themes were selected to study the intra-gender relationship of Pakistani women at workplace.

Bargaining Patriarchy as Survival Strategy: Preserving Social Capital through Internalization of Masculinity

“No one takes a woman seriously if she stays meek and contained to herself... to be heard within men we have to be like men. It is important that we endorse our words the way they do, otherwise we will stay unheard.” (32-year-old Female Respondent, In-Depth Interview)

The workplace environment and office-based norms are patriarchal in Pakistan, for public spaces are male-dominating and men oriented. With the awareness of talent to actualize one's potential, global debates about empowerment, and growing economic needs have pushed women in public spaces of offices. However, the toxic masculine values at working place pose difficulties for women to adapt. It is, therefore, women who adjust to these rules of patriarchy to find a place where they can be heard and their work can be recognized, which Kandiyoti (1988), called as 'Patriarchal bargain'. I will use this concept as a theoretical framework in this article, to comprehend how women struggle to get identified as active agents capable to perform office tasks, and the ways they oppose notions of female being passive at workplace to depict they can navigate the office politics. In the above verbatim, one of the respondents informed me that acting like men in terms of endorsing their decisions is important if women want organizational authorities to hear their voice about their needs. These authorities are usually men with values adopted from the patriarchal culture, both local male-oriented culture and global masculine culture of organizations. I inferred from the conversations of respondents and participants, that acting like a woman with feminine responsibilities does not contribute them in climbing the ladder of power or does not influence in demonstrating their skills. Moreover, during my field research and conducting workshops, I observed that women did not repudiate the feminine qualities out rightly but despised the feminine responsibilities. For example, dressing up, speaking softly, arranging feasts, acting obedient towards the male bosses, and exchanging gifts was common in all female working ladies. However, feminine responsibilities, especially pertinent to the household duties, were not welcomed by the working women who consider feminine responsibilities as a hurdle in the way of their careers. These working women have internalized patriarchal masculinity, therefore, while contesting the patriarchal norms they endorse these principles to gain advances and perks of workplace (Kandiyoti 1988; Ruslin 2022). Although, the promotions of the women who bargain patriarchy are gained at the

expense of other women that impacts gender equality at a greater expense (Azmawati et al. 2017; Ruslin 2022). At conceptual level, patriarchal bargain is an intentional decision of the women, shown in adjustment of their actions to increase their safety and life-choices, which they make in opposition to the restrictions offered by patriarchal system (Kandiyoti 1988). This bargain is a shared comprehension between the two genders because of which women gain agency by exchanging their submission with the protection within patriarchal system. Nevertheless, these bargains introduce a race for power among women and generate new hierarchies among women.

“To adjust at workplace, we have to adopt the rules of men because there is a lot of competition in job market, be it among men, women, or both. Similarly, economic needs and living demands are on peak, we do not have time to challenge the system, rather we have to adjust in the system to gain some power to live in this society.” (36-year-old Female Respondent, In-Depth Interview)

Upon further exploring this divide in sisterhood of working women, I discovered that working women often bargain with patriarchy to accumulate social capital for sake of gaining power at their workplace. To explore this action of power and performance as social capital of the working women, I have engaged Bourdieu’s theory of social capital. Although Bourdieu’s conceptualization of social capital deals primarily with the class divide and social stratification in the society instead of gender relations and hierarchy (Stead, Elliot, and Gardiner 2021). Yet, this theoretical framework can be adapted to analyse gender relations, especially to comprehend contemporary gender practices and the ways individual utilize capital in stratified social fields of organizational setting (Huppertz 2012). The incorporation of Bourdieu’s concept of accumulating social capital will assist in exploring the approaches through which women gain legitimacy in their professions (Naidu-Young et al. 2024; Kushins and Quispe- Agnoli 2025) through patriarchal bargain to internalize masculinity. In short, in this paper my study suggests that for Pakistani working women professional success and accumulation of social power at workplaces rests on patriarchal bargains, demanding conformity with masculine ideals of power for recognition in office workspace. This strategic manoeuvre serves women with the patriarchal advantages, for they act in a way that appears as if they are following the rules of patriarchy that assists them in implementing their desires and agency.

Fractured Sisterhood: Subjugated Working Women with Responsibilities of Care

The group of women, other than the women who have internalized masculinity as a form of patriarchal bargain to accumulate power as a social capital, are those who consider empathy and caregiving responsibilities as a form of social capital. This second group of women bargain the patriarchy by taking up the responsibility of both office and home. For, them working at the office is essential to get empowered economically and by demonstrating their abilities acquired through qualification. Whereas, handling responsibility of house is their prime responsibility, for they consider it to be their identity and expression of care. The respondents of research and the participants of workshop with feminine responsibilities of care as their priority illustrated that for them the household responsibilities of care are not a burden. Rather, their choice of work is to either support their families financially or to express their learning practically. However, these women mentioned that their needs are not recognized at workplaces, and they are rarely appreciated at home. As one of the participants of the workshop mentioned,

“The most difficult life is of a working lady who wants to balance her house-office tasks. She is neither considered enough at workplace nor is appreciated at home. You might see that the most of the divorced working ladies are not those who are extremely career-oriented who do not want to have families, nor the subjugate housewives get divorce. The difficult marriages come in the share of the working women who want to give best to their families and performs

exceptional at workplace despite multiple responsibilities. Their female counterparts at workplace never cooperate with them in comprehending their needs, the male colleagues are already difficult to manage. Similarly, their husbands or in-laws never, understand the tiredness they carry from workplace, they just want household to be performed in time.” (36-year-old Female Participant, Gender-Sensitivity Workshop Participant)

These responses depicted that career-oriented women with internalized masculinity at workplace do not recognize needs of other women. These women have dual struggles, in homes these struggles are result of socio-cultural structures, and at workplace due to male-dominated work values. Such a tension between the responsibilities of these working women limits their agency and the burden of work exceeds their capacity (Ebaugh 1993). Furthermore, the invisibility of care work due to being unpaid duty, is coupled with the patriarchal values of institutions, devalues societal contribution of these women systematically (Seedat and Rondón 2021). These women expect the other working women at their workplace to empathize and understand their needs and become their voice. However, they feel more competition from their female counterparts. These women have observed that the group of women with internalized masculinity consider themselves more competent and empowered at workplace, and do not recognize the domestic problems and engagements of these women. As a result, these women do not prefer the women with internalized masculinity to not be their managers at work. The difference in interests and approaches towards life and work ensues in fractured concept of sisterhood, derived from the second wave of feminism to ensure collective rights of all women. This fracturing of sisterhood depicts that women of Pakistan have heterogeneous needs, hence, a monolithic concept of empowerment can not be applied to them as a collective group. By implication, the antagonism is no more inter-gender between men and women, rather this conflict transcends the gender binary and transforms into intra-gender competition, where women are in hostility with each other.

Intra-Gender Competition: Struggle for Power at Workplace vs Endeavour of Work-Life Balance

The qualitative data gained from the insights of Pakistani working women demonstrated that working women of Pakistan do not have shared lived experiences and preferences. Moreover, the paper reveals, femininities of working women are transforming, and that these women are not a monolithic group of women. Rather their solidarities are conditional and femininities are fragmented. In this paper, the working women of Pakistan are studied in two wide groups, the first who have internalized masculinity and prefer individual advancements to gain power, authority, and autonomy at workplaces. The second group of working women are more feminized, and experience recurring friction between their focus on the official tasks and their caregiving responsibilities at home. The tension is because both the types of duties demand time, responsibility and availability. Hence, they juggle through these two types of duties, the office tasks demand competition and the household duties that rests on emotions. The male-dominating workspaces in Pakistan offer empowerment which is masculinized and patriarchal. For this reason, those women who adopt the patriarchal rules of workplace can survive the professional hindrances, whereas women who focus on practices and ethics of care are under-valued and are framed as weakness. In short, the competition among working women creates hierarchical relations, which entails absence of sisterhood and intra-gender competition where women with internalization of masculinity devalues the women who values caregiving responsibilities, as stated by one of the participants,

“We as women must know that to achieve in our careers, we must abandon the desire for committing ourselves with the responsibilities of care. Any domestic tasks that engage women deeply, like childcare or commitments in marriage may hinder their advancement in career,

as well as the organizational tasks and projects” (40-year-old Female Participant, Gender-Sensitivity Workshop Participant)

The verbatim, as shared above, depicts that the women, who bargain with patriarchy, get benefit for themselves through patriarchal bargain, yet their actions may conflict with the collective interests of females as a group (Roux 2019). Many of them dialectically adjusted feminine and masculine performances to gain identity at traditional masculine spaces, ensure their voice are heard, and to avoid marginalization (Lewis & Benschop 2023). These women achieved agency by displaying feminine performances to their senior male colleagues, whereas adopting masculine roles in front of other women at workplace along with relinquishing themselves from caregiving responsibilities of their homes. Such feminine performances of working women who have internalized masculinity for other women involve; asking for assistance of male colleagues despite knowing the task, wearing heavy make up, serving refreshments to the senior male colleagues, and most importantly blaming of delaying the tasks to the women who leave offices early to carry out their domestic caregiving responsibilities. Through this intricate negotiation of gender roles working women of Global South strategically apt to masculine values at workplace while retaining some aspects of femininity to navigate through complexities of professional workplace environments (Lashari 2023). The analysis of the insights showed that these women despised the women who accomplish their caregiving responsibilities at home along with performing their best at the workplace. It is because women with internalized patriarchy feels relegated if there is a better performance at workplace by a woman with domestic responsibilities with out bargaining patriarchy or internalizing masculinity to achieve power at workplace. This leads towards an intra-gender competition among these two groups of women, where one struggles for power and the other for balance. It is because Patriarchal Bargain is a complex dynamic where women with internalized masculinity, despite achieving agency, contribute towards subjugation of other women with responsibility of caregiving at home. These subjugated women do not bargain with patriarchy, hence can not speak in front of men and women in power. The patriarchal bargain is advantageous only to the participant women who impose patriarchal rules upon other nonparticipant women, who stay coerced, rather are double coerced by their male and female counterparts appreciative of patriarchal bargain. In short, this bargain creates an intra-gender resistance, which reinforces the gender binary and inter-gender conflict between patriarchal men and oppressed women, whereas transcend the gender binary and inter-gender antagonism between the patriarchal men and the women who bargain with patriarchy. Such antagonism underscores a complex interplay between the desire for individual agency and the societal norms in the workplaces of Global South (Chaudry & Dutt 2022). This leads towards a paradoxical situation where despite the fact women contest inequalities and subjugation cased by patriarchy (Alyousif and Sallehuddin 2024) yet have negotiated with the patriarchal system for power (Ruslin 2022). Resultantly, the concept of sisterhood is exhausted, thus resulting in nuanced non-monolithic concept of women equality where some women become passive victim of patriarchy from their own sisters at public spaces.

Conclusion

By employing ethnographic research and theoretical framework of Kandiyoti’s Patriarchal Bargain and Bourdieu’s concept of Social Capital, this paper interrogates the assumptions couched in global narrative of women empowerment by examining the lived-experiences and practices to understand female to female relationships of women within male-dominated workplace environment. The central concept of this paper is that the global narrative of empowerment of women through employability does not unfold the collective emancipation of the Pakistani working women as form of sisterhood. Rather, the empowerment and emancipation in office place, with patriarchal neoliberal social structures, creates a rift

between Pakistani working women. These women adopt individualized strategies of advancement and survival where some of them adopt masculine traits and others take up the responsibilities of care, both at office and their homes. This individualized effort of advancement and disintegration of collective benefit of women as a group fractures the concept of sisterhood offered by early feminisms.

The key empirical findings of this paper provide invaluable insights into the phenomenon of patriarchal bargain through which a group of women internalize masculinity to gain power. Thus, produces multiple transformed femininities of the working women of Pakistan with competition, emotional distance and detachment among each other. Moreover, it results in intra-gender competition because of women to women subjugation, especially towards those working women who perform the roles of care giver in their homes. These women are expected to act in a similar caregiving role, without questioning the authority of men and of women who have internalized masculinity. Therefore, the paper explores how Pakistani working women with different needs in their offices transform their practices into a social capital. It depicts a divide in the group of women at workplace, the first is the group of women who depict an interplay of internalized masculinity, such as lack of empathy or caregiving responsibilities at home and selective femininity, like observing silence before authority. The second group of working women are with feminine responsibilities because of which they juggle between their duties at workplace and domestic responsibilities.

Finally, this paper offers a significant contribution that patriarchy, and toxic masculinity can not be stipulated as a male trait; women may also internalize these attributes to gain position of power (Manne 2020). It is depicted that patriarchy circulate across gender, and in case of women, it results in stratification of the women as a group. This paper calls for rethinking the gender-relations within Pakistan by transcending the established gender-binary between men and women. Interventions of the concepts of class-divide, and engaging identity of marginalized groups, within this intra-gender framework will engage more critical aspects of research for future to challenge the global concepts of empowerment through employability.

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