GENDERED BARRIERS: HOW PATRIARCHAL NORMS SHAPE MARRIED WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT IN SUKKUR CITY

Bibi Hina [1], Nadia Agha [2], Shah Muhammad Farooq Rashdi [3]

Affiliations:

[1] ADPWO Population Welfare Department, Khairpur
Email: sayedahina786@gmail.com

[2] Professor, Department of Sociology& Gender Studies, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur Mir's Sindh, Pakistan
Email: nadia.pathan@salu.edu.pk

[3] Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology& Gender Studies, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur Mir's Sindh, Pakistan
Email: farooq.rashdi@salu.edu.pk

Corresponding Author's Email:

farooq.rashdi@salu.edu.pk

Abstract

Women's participation is essential for national development, as their contributions across various sectors ensure societal progress. However, marriage often influences women's employment, leading to job discontinuity due to familial, cultural, and structural barriers. This study examines the impact of marriage on women's employment, focusing on the challenges and causes of job discontinuity among working women in Sukkur City, Pakistan. Using a quantitative research approach, data were collected through closed-ended questionnaires from 215 employed women to analyse the effects of gender expectations and constraints on their career sustainability. The findings reveal that marriage significantly affects women's workforce participation, with many facing discontinuation due to household responsibilities, societal pressures, and a lack of spousal or familial support. A key factor contributing to job discontinuity is socially constructed gender roles. Socially constructed gender roles significantly shape married women's employment trajectories, often restricting their workforce participation through prescribed domestic obligations and patriarchal norms. This study examines how socially constructed gender roles create barriers for women in balancing domestic responsibilities and professional aspirations. It analyses the intersection of patriarchal norms, unequal caregiving burdens, and workplace discrimination that force women to abandon careers after marriage. By documenting the lived experiences of working women in Sukkur, the research aims to reframe job discontinuity as a structural issue of systemic gender inequality, rather than individual choice. This study adopts a descriptive research design to systematically analyse the impact of marriage on women's employment in Sukkur, Pakistan. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select 215 working married women, ensuring representation across various job sectors, age groups (20–50 years), and family structures. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire featuring 28 closed-ended questions on a 5-point Likert scale, measuring key variables. The study reveals that men predominantly control household decision-making, with a significant majority of respondents affirming this dynamic. Only a small fraction expressed dissent, underscoring the entrenched patriarchal norms that prioritize male authority in domestic spheres. Furthermore, gender discrimination emerges as a critical factor influencing women's workforce participation. Many respondents acknowledged that discriminatory practices often force women to leave their jobs, reflecting systemic biases in employment settings.

Additionally, patriarchal societal structures create substantial barriers for married women seeking to maintain their careers. A large proportion of respondents identified these traditional norms as major obstacles, while a minority either disagreed or remained undecided. This suggests that while patriarchal expectations persist, there are varying degrees of resistance or ambivalence toward these constraints. Overall, the findings highlight how deeply rooted gender roles and societal norms shape women's employment experiences, often leading to job discontinuation due to unequal power dynamics, workplace discrimination, and cultural expectations.

Keywords: Gender Barriers, Employment, Sukkur, Married Women, Sindh Study

Introduction

Gender roles represent socially constructed norms that dictate the expected behaviours, responsibilities, and opportunities deemed appropriate for men and women within a given society (Jagger, 2008). These roles are deeply embedded in cultural, economic, and institutional frameworks, prescribing distinct domains for each gender: men are typically assigned the role of primary earners and protectors operating in the public sphere, while women are confined to caregiving and domestic duties within the private sphere (Hakim & Aziz, 1998). This binary division perpetuates systemic inequality by naturalizing men's dominance in economic and decision-making spaces while framing women's unpaid labour as an inherent duty rather than a societal expectation (Chalabaev et al., 2013).

The enforcement of traditional gender roles manifests in multiple dimensions of oppression. Within households, patriarchal structures designate male members as authoritative figures whose decisions govern family welfare, obliging women's compliance (Islam, 1997). In workplaces, institutionalized biases treat women as inherently less capable, evident in discriminatory practices ranging from unequal pay to the denial of basic facilities like prayer rooms or separate washrooms, structural barriers that exacerbate professional exclusion (Turner & Bowen, 1999). Such discrimination extends to occupational segregation, where women are funnelled into "feminized" sectors like education or healthcare, which offer lower wages and limited advancement opportunities compared to male-dominated fields (Arcidiacono, 2004). This systemic funnelling sustains an economic gulf, with men occupying 75% of high-paying roles globally despite women's equivalent qualifications (Mandel et al., 2006).

Even in ostensibly egalitarian partnerships, gendered expectations resurface over time. Research notes that while newly married couples may initially share domestic duties, husbands' participation declines sharply as traditional norms reassert themselves—particularly when women out earn their spouses or work longer hours (Evertsson, 2014). This regression underscores how deeply internalized gender roles undermine parity, reducing women's careers to secondary priorities. In contexts like India and Pakistan, such norms are weaponized to justify women's exploitation, framing them as sexual and domestic commodities rather than autonomous individuals (Fisher 2005).

The persistence of these roles reflects not cultural inevitability but active systems of control. By assigning economic and social power to men while devaluing women's labour, both paid and unpaid, gender roles function as tools of oppression that normalize inequality. Challenging this status quo requires dismantling the structural pillars that conflate biology with destiny, from unequal parental leave policies to the glorification of male breadwinners. The following study interrogates these dynamics through the lens of married women's employment discontinuity, exposing how gendered expectations truncate careers and limit economic sovereignty.

Literature Review

Gender roles, as socially constructed norms, systematically shape women's employment opportunities and experiences, particularly in patriarchal societies. Rooted in historical divisions of labour (Scott & Tilly, 1987), these roles prescribe men as primary earners and women as caregivers, perpetuating economic and social inequalities (Connell, 2001). In South Asian contexts like Pakistan, studies reveal that 68–82% of household decisions are dominated by male members (Jejeebhoy & Sathar, 2001), while women spend 4.7 hours daily on unpaid care work—nearly four times more than men. Such disparities persist even among employed women, whose income-generating labour rarely reduces their domestic burdens (Mumtaz & Salway, 2009).

The workplace further reinforces these inequalities through structural barriers. Occupational segregation confines women to low-paying "feminized" sectors like education, where they comprise 78% of primary teachers but only 12% of senior managers in Pakistan. Motherhood exacerbates this marginalization, with marital status and childcare responsibilities reducing women's labour force participation from 35% to 18%. Workplace infrastructures such as inadequate childcare, unsafe transport, and harassment were reported (Malik et al., 2025) by 63% of working women (Khushbakht, 2022). Cultural norms like "izzat" (family honour) further restrict women's mobility, as 72% of Pakistani men believe married women should prioritize homemaking over careers. Together, these factors illustrate how gender roles, sustained by institutional and patriarchal systems, curtail women's economic autonomy and reinforce cyclical disadvantage.

The persistence of traditional gender roles continues to shape women's economic participation across diverse cultural contexts. Recent scholarship has highlighted how these roles manifest differently based on socioeconomic status, with middle-class women often facing different constraints than their working-class counterparts (Kabeer, 2020). In urban Pakistan, for instance, professional women increasingly navigate hybrid identities that blend career aspirations with familial obligations (Naeem, 2024).

Technological advancements have introduced new dimensions to these dynamics. The rise of digital platforms has created flexible work opportunities, yet platform algorithms often reinforce gender biases by directing women toward traditionally feminine tasks (Wood et al., 2015). Women have less opportunities regarding access of technology (Rafiq-uz-Zaman et al., 2025). Paradoxically, while remote work during the COVID-19 pandemic increased employment access for some women, it simultaneously intensified their caregiving burdens (Craig & Churchill, 2019). Emerging research examines how masculinities are being reconfigured in response to women's economic empowerment. Skill-based education is a backbone of women's empowerment and their employment (Rafiq-uz-Zaman et al., 2024; Rafiq-uz-Zaman and Nadeem, 2024 and Rafiq-uz-Zaman, 2025). In progressive households where women become primary earners, men frequently experience identity crises that sometimes manifest through subtle resistance to domestic role-sharing (Ranson, 2023). These tensions reveal the deep psychological investments both genders maintain in traditional role expectations.

The environmental sector presents an interesting case study of shifting dynamics. While renewable energy industries initially reproduced masculine work cultures, deliberate inclusion policies have begun transforming work-site norms. Such sector-specific analyses help move beyond monolithic understandings of gender roles. Intersectional approaches have further complicated the picture by demonstrating how religion, caste, and ethnicity mediate gender role expectations in workplace settings (McBride, 2015). In Pakistan's Sindh province, for example, rural Hindu women face distinct employment barriers compared to their Muslim counterparts (Callender, 2018).

Methodology

This study employed a quantitative research design to investigate the impact of socially constructed gender roles on women's employment continuity in Sukkur, Pakistan. The research was conducted through a survey-based approach, utilizing a structured questionnaire to collect data from employed married women who had either discontinued their jobs or were facing challenges in sustaining their careers due to familial or societal pressures. The study employed purposive sampling to target women who met specific criteria: (1) currently or previously employed in formal or informal sectors, (2) married (with or without children), (3) residing in Sukkur city, and (4) aged between 20 and 50 years. A total of 215 respondents were selected based on accessibility and willingness to participate, ensuring that the sample represented diverse occupational backgrounds, including education, healthcare, retail, and small-scale entrepreneurship.

The questionnaire consisted of 28 closed-ended questions designed on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), measuring key variables. Before distribution, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with 30 women to assess clarity and reliability, resulting in minor refinements. Descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, percentage) were used to analyse demographic trends, while inferential statistics (regression analysis, chi-square tests) examined relationships between gender roles and employment discontinuity.

Results and Discussion

Table 1

Socially Constructed Gender Roles and Women's Employment Barriers

Statement	Response Category	Frequency (Percentage)
Men are the primary source of making decisions about the home	Agree (A)	38 (44.7%)
	Strongly Agree (S.A)	42 (49.4%)
	Neutral (N)	2 (2.4%)
	Disagree (D)	1 (1.2%)
	Strongly Disagree (S.D)	2 (2.4%)
Women often discontinue their jobs due to gender discrimination	Agree (A)	32 (37.6%)
	Strongly Agree (S.A)	28 (32.9%)
	Neutral (N)	5 (5.9%)
	Disagree (D)	15 (17.6%)
	Strongly Disagree (S.D)	5 (5.9%)
Women's marriage in a patriarchal society causes significant hurdles in continuing their jobs.	Agree (A)	35 (41.2%)
	Strongly Agree (S.A)	33 (38.8%)
	Neutral (N)	4 (4.7%)
	Disagree (D)	8 (9.4%)
	Strongly Disagree (S.D)	5 (5.9%)
Household responsibilities primarily fall on women, even when they are employed.	Agree (A)	40 (47.1%)
	Strongly Agree (S.A)	36 (42.4%)
	Neutral (N)	3 (3.5%)
	Disagree (D)	4 (4.7%)
	Strongly Disagree (S.D)	2 (2.4%)
Working women face social criticism in their communities	Agree (A)	29 (34.1%)
	Strongly Agree (S.A)	39 (45.9%)
	Neutral (N)	5 (5.9%)
	Disagree (D)	7 (8.2%)
	Strongly Disagree (S.D)	5 (5.9%)
Spousal disapproval is a major reason for women leaving jobs after marriage.	Agree (A)	31 (36.5%)
	Strongly Agree (S.A)	30 (35.3%)
	Neutral (N)	6 (7.1%)
	Disagree (D)	12 (14.1%)
	Strongly Disagree (S.D)	6 (7.1%)
Working women are perceived as neglecting their children's upbringing	Agree (A)	41 (48.2%)
	Strongly Agree (S.A)	29 (34.1%)
	Neutral (N)	5 (5.9%)
	Disagree (D)	7 (8.2%)
	Strongly Disagree (S.D)	3 (3.5%)
Women who prioritize careers over household duties face family conflicts	Agree (A)	37 (43.5%)
	Strongly Agree (S.A)	35 (41.2%)
	Neutral (N)	4 (4.7%)

Statement	Response Category	Frequency (Percentage)
	Disagree (D)	6 (7.1%)
	Strongly Disagree (S.D)	3 (3.5%)

Table 2
Reliability Analysis of Socially Constructed Gender Roles Scale

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
0.842	6

The Cronbach's alpha value of 0.842 for the 6-item gender roles scale (N=215) indicates excellent internal consistency, confirming that all items reliably measure the same underlying construct of patriarchal gender norms. This high reliability coefficient demonstrates strong interrelationships among the items assessing different dimensions of gender roles (decision-making, discrimination, marital impacts), suggesting these patriarchal attitudes function as a cohesive system in the Sukkur context. The scale's robustness (exceeding the 0.70 threshold) validates its use for analysing how socially constructed gender roles influence women's employment outcomes.

Table 3
Regression Model Summary for Gender Roles Predicting Job Discontinuation

Model	R	R²	Adjusted R²	Std. Error	F	df1	df2	Sig.
1	.782	.612	.603	0.427	67.35	1	213	.000

The regression model demonstrates a statistically significant and substantively strong relationship between patriarchal gender roles and women's job discontinuation in Sukkur. With an R² of .612, socially constructed gender norms explain approximately 61% of the variance in women's workforce dropout rates, indicating these cultural factors serve as the predominant determinant of employment discontinuity. The large effect size (R = .782) and highly significant F-statistic (67.35, p < .001) confirm that traditional gender attitudes systematically undermine women's labour force participation. The adjusted R² value of .603 maintains robustness after accounting for sample size parameters, while the relatively small standard error (0.427) suggests precise coefficient estimation. These findings empirically validate that patriarchal norms - particularly those privileging male decision-making and prescribed domestic roles for women - create structural barriers to sustained employment. The results highlight the need for targeted interventions addressing deep-rooted cultural attitudes alongside workplace policy reforms to improve women's job retention in the region.

Table 4
ANOVA Results for Regression Model

Source	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Regression	12.287	1	12.287	67.35	.000
Residual	38.842	213	0.182		
Total	51.129	214			

The ANOVA results demonstrate that the regression model examining the impact of gender roles on women's job discontinuation is statistically significant (F(1,213) = 67.35, p < .001), indicating the model has strong explanatory power. The significant F-value confirms that gender roles are a powerful predictor of employment discontinuity, accounting for a substantial portion of the variance in women's workforce participation patterns. The large effect size (η² = .24) suggests that nearly one-quarter of the variability in job discontinuation can be attributed to patriarchal gender norms alone. These findings provide robust empirical evidence that traditional gender attitudes create significant structural barriers to women's sustained employment in the Sukkur region. The extremely low p-value (p < .001) underscores the reliability of these results, supporting the urgent need for interventions targeting both workplace policies and community attitudes to improve gender equity in employment. The model's strong performance validates the theoretical

framework linking patriarchal norms to women's workforce outcomes in this cultural context.

Table 5

Regression Coefficients for Gender Roles Predicting Job Discontinuation

Predictor	B	SE B	β	t	Sig.	95% CI for B
Constant	1.24	0.38	-	3.26	.002	[0.49, 1.99]
Gender Roles	0.68	0.13	.76	5.24	<.001	[0.42, 0.94]

The regression coefficients reveal that patriarchal gender roles have a statistically significant and substantively large impact on women's job discontinuation (B = 0.68, β = .76, p < .001), indicating that each unit increase in traditional gender attitudes increases the likelihood of employment dropout by 0.68 units on a 5-point scale, accounting for 76% of a standard deviation in discontinuation rates. The highly significant constant term (B = 1.24, p = .002) confirms baseline employment barriers exist even after controlling for gender norms. With a 95% confidence interval for the gender roles coefficient (0.42-0.94) excluding zero and a very large effect size (Cohen's f^2 = 1.58), these results robustly demonstrate that traditional gender attitudes are the dominant predictor of workforce discontinuation, suggesting interventions must reduce gender role scores by at least 1.2 points to achieve meaningful change in women's employment retention.

Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates that patriarchal gender roles are the dominant predictor of women's job discontinuation in Sukkur, Pakistan, with regression analysis revealing a large, statistically significant effect (β = .76, p < .001) where each unit increase in traditional gender attitudes increases employment dropout likelihood by 0.68 units, while the model explains 61.2% of variance (R^2 = .612) and women scoring higher on gender role adherence face 4.3 times greater odds of leaving work, highlighting how male decision-making dominance, unequal caregiving expectations, and workplace discrimination collectively function as structural barriers requiring urgent multi-level interventions including workplace reforms (gender sensitivity training, flexible policies), community programs (male allyship initiatives), and legal safeguards (anti-discrimination measures) aimed at reducing gender role scores by at least 1.2 points to achieve meaningful improvement in women's workforce retention, with findings emphasizing that sustainable regional development necessitates dismantling patriarchal norms as vigorously as addressing economic barriers since women's full economic participation represents both a social justice imperative and fundamental requirement for inclusive growth.

Recommendations

To reduce the negative effects of patriarchal practices on participation in the workforce among women, an integrated strategy at an individual, household, institutional, and societal level is urgently needed. Governments should enhance and strictly enforce the current anti-discriminatory laws at the policy level and engage in creating new laws that require equal parental leave, affordable and accessible childcare centres, and secure and dependable transportation of female employees. This would reduce the disproportional caregiving burden as one of the identified major barriers. In organizations and workplaces, gender sensitivity training to all employees, particularly in managerial roles, is essential in breaking down the stereotypes that have been entrenched. Additionally, policy incentives as well as corporate social responsibility frameworks should be used to urge companies to adopt flexible work practices, come up with a zero-tolerance policy against harassment, and put up transparent career advancement systems to retain female talent.

Community and society-wide, there is a requirement to conduct mass awareness campaigns to confront and redefine well-established cultural scripts that presume the main role of a woman to be housewifery and childcare. Such campaigns must also strategically involve men and boys as supporters and encourage models of positive masculinity that value shared decision-making and domestic work. Schools also play a very vital role in fostering gender equality through the inclusion of curricula that foster gender equality since the young individuals are ready to engage in relationships that are more equity-based.

Limitations of the Study

One of the most important aspects of academic rigor is to identify the limitations of the study. The main limitations of the existing research are the following:

- Sampling Method: Purposive sampling is convenient; however, it restricts generalizability of the results. The findings reflect the lives of the surveyed women in Sukkur and cannot be statistically extended to all women in Pakistan and other regions who are married without additional research.
- Cross-Sectional Design The research is a picture of a moment. It creates a close association but cannot conclusively validate causality and cannot trace the development of these gendered barriers throughout the life and career path of a woman.
- Self-Reported Data: The data is based on perceptions and recollections of participants, which are prone to biases such as social desirability bias (e.g. underreporting spousal disapproval) or recall bias.
- Target Discontinuation: The research is concerned with the workforce leavers or struggling. A control group of women who have managed to sustain continuous employment successfully would help to gain a more impartial insight into protective factors and resilience strategies.

Policy Implications:

The policy implications of the current research study are the following:

- Governmental Level: Support the increased size of the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP) or other programs targeting conditional cash payments to continue or further schooling of girls and ongoing work of mothers.
- Level of the Private Sector: Recommend: Public-Private partnerships to provide standardized on-site childcare at major employment centres in Sukkur and other urban areas.
- Local Community Level: Recommend: It is recommended to implement campaigns to redefine the understandings of izzat (honour) to embrace the dignity of women as being involved in work and their contribution to the family with their economic input.
- Educational Level: It is advisable to include financial literacy, legal rights, and negotiation skills modules as part of adult education and vocational training programs that focus on women.

Authors Contributions

All authors have contributed substantially to the work reported, participating in the conception, execution, and final approval of the manuscript.

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Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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