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RESEARCH PAPER

Work-life Balance of Women Entrepreneurs of District Sheikhupura

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ABSTRACT

The current research was conducted to understand the dynamics of work-life balance of female entrepreneurs in Sheikhupura. Entrepreneurship is the choice of many people as the way to acquire more flexibility and independence in managing their family and business roles. Within the patriarchal environment of Pakistan, however, the burden of domestic responsibilities and conservative cultural practices exacerbate work-life balance issues of women entrepreneurs. In this qualitative research, data was collected through in-depth interviews. Sample was purposively selected from married and divorced women entrepreneurs who had run their business between one to twelve years and had children. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that women entrepreneurs were always able to juggle between their jobs and family despite the challenges they encountered such as discrimination, harassment, fraud, and normal gender role expectations. However, these barriers did not stop the participants because they adopted self-care practices and tapped on the support systems. It is recommended that the policy makers must establish local support centers where they offer financial and psychological counseling as well as gender friendly policies. Also, institutional support is needed to ensure fair conditions for female entrepreneurs.

| **KEYWORDS** | Entrepreneurship, Women Entrepreneurship, IPA, Work-Life Balance, Sheikhupura |

Introduction

Women entrepreneurs are women who initiate, operate and expand their own enterprises through financial risks and making critical decisions to attain profitability and success. They are important in economic development because they create jobs, bring about innovations, as well as through their contribution to community growth. Although the entrepreneurship was considered a male or periphery activity as early as the 1800s, it has changed its paradigm significantly over the past decades. Entrepreneurship has today been established as another major process that contributes to economic growth and innovation (Nawaz, 2018). The global campaigns such as the Beijing declaration and ILO requirements have made women more economically visible by granting them access to resources and markets, which has made entrepreneurship a source of economic and social empowerment (Prucha, 2024). In spite of these changes, women still struggle to balance between work and home. Entrepreneurship is the choice of many people as the way to acquire more flexibility and independence in managing their family and business roles (Agarwal & Lenka, 2015). Many women leave the corporate sector to start their own entepreneural venture, so that they can escape the menace of glass-ceiling, but they face the second glass-ceiling (Salahuddin, Mahmood & Ahmad, 2022). Within the patriarchal environment of Pakistan, however, the burden of domestic responsibility particularly childcare, and conservative cultural practices as pardah (veil) and izzat (honor) make the work-life balance struggles that the women face even worse (Roomi et al., 2018). Empirical data also proves that women entrepreneurs in Pakistan have limited time, gender biases, and socio-cultural demands, but

in many cases, they manage time with the help of the following strategies: time scheduling, delegation, and planning (Rehman & Roomi, 2012).

According to IPA-based research in Pakistan, entrepreneurship is actually offering women with control and flexibility, but cultural demands and family requirements play a major role that appears to be an overall work-family strain phenomenon in South Asian and Islamic societies (Mathew & Panchanatham, 2012). The problems are not limited to the local arena especially the issue of funds. Due to the fact that women entrepreneurs are often marginalized by the formal financial institutions, they often use microfinance, grants, or family funds. Recent developments attest to institutional discrimination of the funding process: female entrepreneurs attract less money and are 30% less likely to be funded after failure than male founders even with equal performance (Bardasi, Sabarwal & Terrell, 2011).

Another important aspect of entrepreneurship that is important to sustain is digital inclusion. The recent studies highlight that women in Pakistan across all fields (particularly in informal ones) can benefit through generative AI and digital tools, enlarging their opportunities and empowering them. This is notwithstanding structural inequalities. Pakistani women are already involved in entrepreneurial activities only at the level of 1 per cent, and the employment of women in the labour forces is only about 24.5 per cent, which shows that there is a great disproportion in access, participation, and opportunity between rural and urban areas (Soomro, Anwar & Rajar, 2019).

These dynamics can be interpreted through the Gender Role Theory (Eagly & Wood, 2020). It hypothesizes that the roles of caregivers and providers attributed to women and men respectively by social expectations bring up the role conflict and limit the autonomy of women in entrepreneurial activities. Much of the current work-life balance is a literature that was created in the Western contexts and managerial environments, but there is limited information regarding the experience of women in entrepreneurship in a patriarchal and developing society (Bisht & Hossain, 2019). This distance clouds the reality of lived experience by Pakistani women entrepreneurs who have to struggle with structural, cultural, and economic obstacles with limited institutional and community provisions. To fill this gap, this paper examines how women entrepreneurs in the District Sheikhupura cope with their service dual responsibility: family and business in the context of social expectations, limited resources and institutional barriers through the prism of IPA and Gender Role Theory. The findings will be used to inform policies, community programs, and support systems that increase the rate of women participating in entrepreneurial activities as well as working towards more even-handed developmental paths.

Literature Review

One of the current trends in the body of current research on the topic of entrepreneurship is work-life balance (WLB), and women in business are often surrounded by deeply ingrained gender expectations and systemic constraints. Women have historically been depicted to be less entrepreneurial as compared to men, who usually run smaller businesses that are based in homes (Ahl, 2019). According to the recent studies (Balawi & Ayoub, 2022), Sweden and other nations with high social support, low capital barrier states have a higher percentage of women entrepreneurs, indicating the inequalities women are exposed to in developing countries. Boundary theory states the way women define and keep boundaries between work and family. In situations where a boundary is crossed repeatedly, like when a female entrepreneur is caring or doing business at home, there is increased stress and emotional labor (Haar & Brougham, 2022). Home labor as a social obligation promoted by cultural values in Pakistan undermines the value of women economically and disintegrates the work-life division; globalization opens opportunities, but fixed role categories persist, further increasing the tension of the WLB (Rizvi, Ali & Hassan, 2023). The qualitative studies of Pakistanis consist of mixed reports: Rehman and Roomi (2012)

depicted how women entrepreneurs, despite their status as social outcasts, time-starved, cope with their family and business gender roles through flexibility, planning, and delegation by applying the IPA. According to modern-day research, women in emerging metropolitan cities like Lahore use community negotiating and scheduling resilience in order to endure structural barriers (Awan & James, 2024).

One of the structural variables that continue to hinder WLB is financial availability. And lacking opportunities to use formal financial institutions, women entrepreneurs usually tend to turn to family funds, informational networks or microfinance, which assumes long working hours and multitasking. The work-family trade-offs increase with this kind of undercapitalization and the weakness of the entrepreneurial side is kept weak as the research indicates (Fayyaz, 2024).

The access to the market and mobility especially beyond the city is molded by strong cultural scripts like purdah and izzat, which exacerbates WLB predicaments when they cannot share the caregiving load. These pressures are compounded with the conventional gender roles allocation making motherhood a non-negotiable aspect and the roots of non-equivalent expectations at home (Grönlund, 2020). Stress can be successfully buffered by family and social networks. All of this is minimized with the help of supportive spouses and family and emotional, strategic, and market-related support through mentoring, peer networks, and social media platforms that aid in overcoming isolation (Ahmed, et. al,2015; Fayyaz, 2024). Such networks are particularly important in patriarchal environments where institutional assistance is limited. Digital inclusion brings about more job opportunities. The studies claim that Pakistani women entrepreneurs employ digital technologies in order to avoid limiting conventions and ensure the decision-making, networking, and mobility. They often acquire these skills in the work (Anzak et al., 2023). The involvement of women in the ICT sector is also improved due to the development of digital infrastructure by the government, such as IT training centers and technology parks contributing to the flexibility of WLB and economic accessibility. Ecosystems must be gender responsive and this is as revealed by the recent organizational and policy studies conducted in Pakistan. It includes safe transport, affordable childcare, anti-harassment laws, and individualized fiscal products that take into consideration the fact of women caring. Such structural interventions coupled with community-based platforms can potentially reduce the pressure of WLB as well as enhancing equity and entrepreneurial performance. In conclusion, it has been shown that Pakistani women entrepreneurs adopt adaptable approaches in limited situations to manage their working and family commitments. As the boundaries of the social and virtual advance, there are still critical problems on the basis of institutional and sociocultural separation. This brings out the importance of conducting context-sensitive, IPA-based research, which would follow both systemic change trajectories and personal coping strategies.

Material and Methods

The research design applied in this study is a qualitative research design with interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) which determined how women entrepreneurs in District Sheikhupura lead their lives amidst the challenges of balancing between their work and home. The reason why IPA is employed is that it allows the researcher to gain a clearer insight into how people interpret what they experience in their sociocultural reality. Gender Role Theory (Eagly, 1987) was also helpful in this research as it gives a framework in which one can consider the influence of gendered expectations on the concept of work-life balance because the career path of women as an entrepreneur is conditioned by the traditional femininity and caregiving norms.

The study relied on a purposive sample of six entrepreneurs who were women and carried out in a District Sheikhupura in Pakistan. Purposeful sampling was used because it guarantees the first-hand information of the participants on the topic of investigation. The

eligibility criteria were: (a) the adult female entrepreneur with her own business that is at least two years old, (b) and simultaneously with household and/or care-giving responsibilities. The members were a mixture of various age groups (27-39 years), marriages, education levels, family sizes and forms of businesses (retail, services, and home-based businesses). This diversity has made it possible to capture diverse views and be consistent with the idiographic nature of IPA of dealing with small yet information rich samples (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Table 1 shows the demographic figures of the participants.

The semi-structured interviews, based on the open-ended questions concerning the entrepreneurial experiences, family demands, social expectations, and strategies of coping, were used to collect the data. The combination of IPA and Gender Role Theory influenced interview questions to get the participants to consider the role of societal gender norms in their views of success, sacrifice, and balance. The interviews were to be conducted in the language of the interviewees, which was Urdu and Punjabi; they were audio-recorded with the consent of the interviewee and later transcribed and translated into English by the first author. Ethical rigor was ensured by obtaining informed consent and by giving full briefing to the participants. Pseudonyms were used to maintain anonymity and information was not included in transcripts to identify the individual.

Table 1
Demographic profile of participants

Name of the participants	Age	Education	Marital status	No of children	Current living arrangements	Business	Experience
Participant 1	28	B.Ed.	Divorced	1	Parental home	Boutique	2 years
Participant 2	33	M.A Islamiyat / education	Married	2	Nuclear	SPA and Beauty salon	8 years
Participant 3	38	M.A Urdu	married	2	Joint family	Abaya center	6 years
Participant 4	26	M.S.C zoology	married	0	Joint family	Videography and Photography studio	2 years
Participant 5	36	M.A Urdu	married	3	Nuclear	Yoga and Gym centre	4 years
Participant 6	38	B. A	married	4	Nuclear	Academy	10 years

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the method used to analyze the data, and it is especially appropriate in engaging in the discussion of how people interpret the lived experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA allowed the researcher to access the meanings attached by women in the entrepreneurship profession about balancing their work and family life within the socio-cultural setting of the District Sheikhupura. The process of analysis was associated with rereading and reading transcripts to gain sufficient immersion into data, making initial notes to determine descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual observations and creating emergent themes based on the accounts of the participants. These emerging themes were then bundled together to establish connections and similarities and, in the process, respecting diversity (Smith & Osborn, 2015).The first author transcribed and translated the audio-recorded interviews, whereas the other authors helped in the coding, clustering, and refining the themes to achieve a level of coherence and credibility in the analysis. Finally, the themes were jointly viewed and systematized by the group to emerge with the salient dimensions of the work-life balance as experienced by the participants (Smith, Flower & Larkin, 2009; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Results and Discussion

The study was intended to investigate the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in District Sheikhupura with special reference to how they manage to balance

their personal and professional lives. This was done with the aim of exploring the difficulties that they faced when having to juggle between family and business life and also to determine how successful they feel they have been over time in balancing work and life. The generated findings were in form of themes that were created in the analysis of data. Tapes were recorded and transcribed into interviews. Following are the themes and sub-themes:

Table 2
Themes and subthemes

Themes	Sub-Themes	
1.Work life balance dynamics	1.	1.1 Experiences of work and life balance.
	2.	1.2 Emotional and psychological problems.
	3.	1.3 Subjective definition of work life balance.
2. Family Social and cultural challenges	4.	2.1 Support and family dynamics
	5.	2.2 Social expectation of the roles of women.
	6.	2.3 Balance dependent on cultural beliefs.
3. Balance maintenance strategies	7.	3.1 Time management and organization
	8.	3.2 Support system
	9.	3.3 Strategies and self-care in copying.
4.Identity and gender roles	10.	4.1 Managing conventional gender norms.
	11.	4.2 Self conceptualization as a mother, wife and entrepreneur.
	12.	4.3 Biography changes which influenced personal identity.
5. Entrepreneurship for life	5.1	Balancing business growth with family needs
	5.2	Personal sacrifices at personal level

Work–Life Balance Dynamics

Work-life balance became a dynamic and flowing process and not a fixed or ideal condition. Participants explained balance as a daily negotiation, which was characterized by trade-offs, compromise, and emotional strength. This is in line with the findings of Craig and Churchill (2021) that women do most unpaid domestic work and in most cases at the cost of their own well-being.

As an illustration, Participant 2 told about the process of arranging appointments with clients in accordance with the school routine of her children, who had their working nights/mornings:

"When my children are at home, I will not be able to concentrate on clients. I complete my house chores and proceed to sit with business when everyone is asleep."

This reflects the second shift introduced by Hochschild (1989) in which women are burdened with both work and domestic commitments. Participants, in spite of their significant contribution to the finances, noted that household responsibilities were still their default role which, again, supports the Gender Role Theory that women are socialized to take caregiving as a priority (Eagly & Wood, 1991). Recent literature confirms that such dual pressures are disproportionately applied to Pakistani women in business, which causes exhaustion and role strain (Khan & Bukhari, 2023; Qureshi & Ramzan, 2022).

Other than logistics, emotional issues were also well-intentioned. Participant 6 also confessed that they felt guilty even though they performed both work and family responsibilities:

"When I have missed a school event of my child, I still feel I am not doing well at home despite having a good business. That guilt never leaves."

This guilt is an expression of long-held cultural norms about what it means to be a good mother, and be available at all times. The same results are reflected by recent studies in South Asia, with women claiming internalized pressure to take on self-sacrificing roles in a family (Shaheen & Naz, 2022; Fatima & Rehman, 2021).

Family, Social, and Cultural Challenges

The difficulty in entering the world of family, social, and cultural expectations was one of the recurring themes. Although families tended to offer structural support, they also strengthened traditional functions. Participant 3 described:

"I cannot help being in my shop even when it is busy and still have to cook and serve my guests at home. The second reason is that business follows the family needs me."

This role strain resembles to the gendered division of labor according to which women are always the central caregivers regardless of their employment obligations (Matias & Fontaine, 2021). It was all a matter of support with conditions attached: family members provided childcare or financial assistance but demanded women place housework first, which expressed the paradox of support as surveillance.

Entrepreneurial action was also restricted by social norms. Participant 2 recalled that he had been rebuked because he had started a beauty salon:

"Others would say it was arrogant and not meek. They reprimanded me on going out of the house, and that it was a female preserve."

This is how the entrepreneurship is viewed through the masculine lens in the traditional environment where assertiveness among women is stigmatized (Roomi et al., 2018; Bisht & Hossain, 2017). Therefore, the majority of the participants varied their business models to fit the culture. Participant 3 arranged her abaya store with only women employees and only women clients, and this is the example of how the entrepreneurs can cope with the restrictions by creating the gender-separated space. These findings contribute to previous studies that show that the entrepreneurial decision-making of Pakistani women is heavily affected by the social approval and cultural restrictions (Ali & Asad, 2020; Riaz & Imran, 2018). Women can establish agency by mediating within these boundaries but simultaneously, they enforce traditional gendered norms.

Balance Strategies

Nevertheless, these obstacles could not halt the participants who have used practical and emotional solutions in order to keep the business and family running. The most frequent coping mechanisms were time management, delegation, and self-care. Participant 1 emphasized:

"I am a time conscious person in life. Each hour will be arranged in such a way that my child will be taken care of, and my shop will be operating well."

It is an indication of the way women are conditioned into careful care-giving and organizing activities, which is in line with the assumption of the Gender Role Theory about the role of women in causing harmony within the family (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Support networks proved to be very important as well. Participant 4 emphasized the participation of her husband occasionally:

"He assists in cooking occasionally, which even in that case, he refers to it as a favor. It is never seen as his duty."

It is consistent with the general results that support by males tends to be discussed as an extraordinary one instead of collective responsibility (Naz & Ahmad, 2021).

Self-care plans also emerged. Participant 5, who owned a yoga studio, said:

"Yoga and meditation give peace. Without my business and my family would not survive in case I drop down mentally."

This coping corresponds with the international results according to the which women in the field of entrepreneurship are more and more inclined to self-care as a method to reconcile two pressures (Mathew & Panchanatham, 2022; Sharma, 2023). Nonetheless, the lack of structural support of childcare, flexible policies, and social safety nets in Pakistan is emphasized by the dependence on personal coping over institutional ones.

Identity and Gender Roles

Participants often considered their self-identities, which were in the process of developing due to entrepreneurship and limited by the traditional norms of gender. They had to not only be successful in business, but also play their roles as wives and mothers as expected. Participant 6 defined herself as a complete woman because she was able to balance both:

"I can boast that I am a good mother and a businesswoman. My business is stable and my children are happy. That is my real success."

This twin identity demonstrates the points of negotiation that women make concerning professional success without failing to perform the traditional roles, which aligns with the Gender Role Theory that states that women internalize the idea of caregiving as being part of their identity (Eagly & Wood, 2012). At the same time, some of them redefined gendered expectations in a touchingly different way. Participant 3 emphasized the concept of modesty and Islamic principles in her company branding and made entrepreneurship as something that would fit the cultural values. Identity construction was powerful under the influence of motherhood. Participant 5 stated:

"The birth of a child changed my whole life. I started up a yoga facility just because it gave me time with my children. I make choices about my business based on the fact that I am a mother."

This demonstrates the direct impact of caregiving activities on entrepreneurship, which confirms the evidence in South Asia of motherhood determining the level of economic activity of women (Chaudhry & Rauf, 2015; Nawaz, 2018).

Entrepreneurship as a Lifelong Pursuit

To most participants, entrepreneurship was not a money-making act but one that involves lifetime dedication that incorporated both life satisfaction and family duty. They had defied the idea that women work must be reserved only in the domestic spheres through entrepreneurship. Participant 2 noted:

"I even have my business small since my children are young. Without my children feeling neglected, it is a failure. But I am independent with even a small business."

There were personal sacrifices towards business growth that were outlined by others. Participant 5 reflected:

"I have missed weddings, family get-togethers as well as holidays. But all sacrifices are worth having the future of my children."

These thoughts highlight the constant stress between caring and development, though they also reveal the agency of women in developing entrepreneurial avenues that hold importance in their social environments. Recent studies also support this idea, and it

is stated that women living in conservative societies are more likely to see the notion of entrepreneurship as a survival process, as well as empowerment (Shabbir, Khan & Ali, 2021; Hill, 2024). Entrepreneurship was therefore a place where the players renegotiated their gender roles and proclaimed to be autonomous without disregarding their cultural requirements. This dual role shows the weakness of the Gender Role Theory and the power of women to reshape it in their practice.

Conclusion

The study provides useful information about the real lives of women entrepreneurs to achieve their professional and personal duties in the patriarchal society. The participants identified as moms, wives, and entrepreneurs- roles that required flexibility, creativity and strength. The concept of work-life balance today is a dynamic, perpetual process that is dictated by various, overlaps situations as opposed to a fixed success. The results provide a picture of how gender norms are internalized, criticized, and redefined in an everyday manner. The women in business were now able to speak, be financially independent and in some instances, attain spiritual salvation. Although traditional structural restrictions existed over time, including the strict cultural expectations and institutional inequality, factors of satisfaction with their achievements were expressed, which enhanced their self-confidence and individuality.

Women too came up with their own methods of coping with conflicting demands like role reclassification, enlisting the help of relatives and time management. These coping mechanisms put more focus on agency of women in re-defining traditional roles and exercise power within given limitations. In general, the study points to the necessity of the how desperately institutional and cultural changes are required to produce the environment where women entrepreneurs can further evolve as a person and as a professional.

Recommendations

The policy makers must establish local support centers where they offer financial and psychological counseling as well as gender friendly policies which include childcare facilities, maternity leave cover and flexible licensing processes. Community entrepreneurship can be used to assist people in the form of peer networks, access to finance, and training that can minimize isolation and lead to sustainable business practices. At social level, the awareness activities should be done to dispel all myths and change attitude towards women in the workforce.

The burden that may fall on the female entrepreneurs could be reduced to a minimum provided that household duties were more equally shared among the families, particularly by the spouses. The resilience of women will also be enabled through the encouragement of self-care, time management and role models of successful women in the media and school. It is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies to determine the relationship between education, religion and socioeconomic status and their role in shaping the perception of women towards work-life balance when family and business requirements vary over time. Future study should broaden the focus by contrasting rural and urban settings.

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