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FEAR, HONOR, AND EVERYDAY SURVIVAL: WOMEN NAVIGATING PUBLIC SPACE IN PUNJAB

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Abstract: This paper considers the experiences and negotiation of women in Punjab in place making that is influenced by fear, cultural honor and the pressures of daily survival. According to eleven ethnographic interviews and participant observations in Rawalpindi, the work demonstrates the state of gendered mobility that is controlled by interacting forces of cultural morality, patriarchal expectations, financial weakness, and habitual harassment. Through use of feminist anthropology, stigma theory and the theories of surveillance and habitus, the research shows that the bodies of women are created as moral spaces where the judgments of the community, the expectation of religion and the control of family meet. These overlapping pressures do not only restrict the mobility of women but also inform them with the emotional landscapes of fear, caution, and strength. In spite of such limitations, women gradually devise methods to move about in the transport, the markets, and the workplaces to balance the economic necessities with the social decency. The results show that female negotiations in everyday life are immersed into a larger system of morality and structure that presupposes such description of space as masculine and such appearance of women as conditional. The article states that to effect useful change it is not enough to improve the infrastructures but necessitates cultural change that subverts honour-based limitations, accepts sexist harassment and the patriarchal control of the women visibility in the social life.

Keywords: Gendered Mobility; Honour (Izzat); Fear; Public Space; Punjab; Harassment; Feminist Anthropology; Surveillance; Ethnography

INTRODUCTION

The mobility of women in Punjab can be defined as a fragile network of cultural morality, patriarchal control, economic susceptibility, and dangers inferential to the daily lives of people in the street. In this respect, movement is never just a physical matter, but a socially loaded and symbolically controlled action mediated by the norms of respectability, formalized gender hierarchy, and the politics of honour (Shaheed, 1999). Streets, markets, bus stops and workplaces have become emotional and moralized spaces that women always have to haggle to be seen, safe and at risk of condemnation. Women do not merely travel somewhere to another point but rather move in what feminist geographers refer to as gendered moral landscapes, spaces, which are structured around gazes, gossip, cultural scripts of modesty and unequal relations of power that dictate who is legitimate in the public life, and by what moral considerations (Phadke, 2007; Pain, 2001).

Feminist anthropologists and gender theorists in South Asia have long debated that the historical structure of space is masculine, and the home is created as a feminine space linked to modesty, honour and protection, through

seclusion (Papanek, 1971; Abu-Lughod, 1999). Such spatial separation results in moralized geography whereby women movement is conditional, surveilled and often challenged. Phadke (2007) shows that the presence of women in the South Asian public space can only be acceptable under the condition that it follows the rules of respectability and familial honour and puts women in the unceasing outsiders in the social spaces that are socially perceived as belonging to men. This everyday harassment, surveillance and moral scrutiny is the result of such ideological boundaries, but the mechanisms of power that circulate simultaneously as external forms of threat and as internalized forms of discipline (Foucault, 1977). Such processes not only involve limitations to the mobility of women, but also define the way female bodies carry fear, how they adapt their bodies, and how they internalize norms of safety and morality.

Based on these premises, this study analyses the ways women in Punjab perceive fear, safety, morality, labour as well as dignity through the understanding of their daily movements. The study is based on eleven in-depth ethnographic interviews in Rawalpindi and the surrounding regions, which discuss the interplay between honour-based demands, economic demands, inequalities at the workplace, and everyday harassment to organize the experiences of women in the public space. Honour (izzat) is one such regulatory moral economy that has families and communities assessing the movements, behaviors and choices of women (Kandiyoti, 1988; Shaheed, 1999). This moral regulation is usually heightened by economic vulnerability because women who work or travel are prone to more scrutiny, suspicion, and risk (Kabeer, 2011).

The theoretical basis of the analytical framework in this study will be based on various traditions. Feminist anthropology offers the means to determine the culturally reproduced and embedded practices of gendered norms, modesty and honour as well as embedding them within everyday practices (Mahmood, 2005). The theory of stigma by Goffman (1963) sheds light on the labeling, judging, and categorizing of women morally in social contexts when the ideal femininity is not met, this may lead to being social misfits. Bourdieu (1977) concept of habitus is employed to explain how gendered dispositions are put into practice to produce social hierarchies through the everyday practice of the body, through posture, dress, tone, gaze, and careful navigation of space. Foucault further examines the implications of his ideas on surveillance and the disciplinary power to express the fact that the very anticipation of being surveilled makes people self-regulate, develop fear and conformity in their behaviour, without being confronted.

These frameworks, in combination, conceptualize the mobility of women not as an individual phenomenon, but as a highly social, political, and highly historical process, whose various structures are intersected by patriarchy, classes, morality and emotional labour. They assist in demonstrating how fear and freedom can be intertwined in the life of women: fear develops when they are monitored, harassed, and judged morally, whereas freedom is negotiated when women must manage their strategies, endurance, and economic or personal need. These dynamics are discussed in more detail in the following paragraphs, by showing how women in Punjab constantly negotiate the gendered moral territory of the urban space, and how their mobility is indicative of the larger socio-cultural power dynamics.

Methods and Materials

The present research is founded on ethnographic research design and dwells on the way women in Punjab find themselves within the public space like markets, transportation, and workplaces. Of particular interest in the research is fear, social judgement, moral surveillance and gendered restrictions on mobility. The method used to gather the data was participant observation and semi-structured interviews, which were in-depth, in the chosen regions of Punjab, mainly in Rawalpindi. Ethnography was selected because it is the best approach in the quest to

learn about the daily experiences and feelings as well as social meanings attached to the mobility of women within the public spaces.

This study has interviewed 11 participants, of which 7 were female and 4 were male. The male participants were invited purposely to get to know the social perceptions, moral attitudes and community perspective concerning the presence of women in public. Among the 11 interviews, 7 were face-to-face interviews in Rawalpindi and the surrounding as the geographical distance and the availability of the participants allowed it, whereas 4 were online interviews on WhatsApp and LinkedIn. This physical and digital ethnographical approach enabled the author to contact a wide variety of respondents and be able to sustain the research process.

It was carried out in various places of Punjab; Rawalpindi was the field location. The face-to-face interviews were conducted in public areas, houses and workplaces based on the comfort of the participants. Online interviews were done via voice calls and WhatsApp and LinkedIn using a text-based interview. These platforms were handy in accessing the participants who were unable to meet face to face because of time or mobility issues. Participants were selected using purposive and snowball sampling. The initial samples were selected considering their interest in the research subject especially working women, students, homemakers, and those who use the public transport and market regularly. The additional participants were referred to making sure that there is diversity in terms of age, gender, occupation and social background. This sampling plan served as a way of obtaining diverse experiences of public space, fear and gender mobility.

The interviews were held mostly in Urdu and Punjabi, as the participants found it more comfortable to speak these languages although some of the participants were more at home in English. All the interviews were later translated accurately in English to be analyzed. Caution was observed to maintain the original meaning, tone and handling of emotions of the participants in the process of translation. The study uses direct quotations to make voices of the participants to be authentic and realistic.

Participant observation was also an important part of this study besides interviews. The researcher monitored the movement of women in markets, transportation, and in the general places of the society. Such observations were on the way women move in space, the body language, how they react to strangers, respond to gazes, and the way they respond to avoid attention or being harassed. The researcher also realized how men behaved in open places and how people socially reacted to the presence of women. These observations contributed to making the interview data more enriched and gave more insight into commonplace gendered experiences.

Ethical issues were also observed during the research. All the participants were informed by word of mouth before interviews. They were told about the aim of the research, the voluntary character of participation, their right to refuse any time, and the guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity. This research has not used any real names. Online interview participants were also made aware of the possible threats of online privacy and confidential personal data were not used in the internet contact. The researcher has stayed in reflexivity during the research because she is aware of her role as a woman in the same cultural background. This was able to create trust with the participants particularly the female respondents who told freely their fears, insecurities, and their experience of being judged morally in the public setting. Meanwhile, the researcher was conscious about the possibility of biases and made sure that not only the stories of the participants formed the basis of interpretations but her own assumptions were considered.

This study has several limitations. The sample size is also not large and thus cannot be used to generalize the results to other regions of Punjab. The research is mainly based on Rawalpindi and therefore, the experiences in the rural areas or remote parts of Punjab might not be all encompassed. The interviews were carried out online, and this

limited the researcher to non-verbal communication and the immediate surroundings. Also, the translation of Urdu and Punjabi languages into English could have caused the cultural subtlety, emotion, and expression to be lost partly. Regardless of these drawbacks, the research can offer quality qualitative data regarding the gendered experiences of fear, judgement, and mobility in the areas of the city.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this research indicate that mobility of women in Punjab is organized in the form of inter-regulated systems of cultural morality, gendered expectations, and material restrictions. To understand these dynamics, the discussion will be structured into five major themes under which women can describe, negotiate, and emotionally feel the public space. These themes encompass how mobility is moralized, the way workplaces reproduce gender hierarchies, how honour and protection influence the decision of women, how economic necessity confounds these norms and how harassment becomes part of the daily routine of their movements. Collectively these themes shed light on the daily negotiations that women have to face to negotiate fear, surveillance and autonomy.

1: Gendered Mobility and the Moral Geography of Public Space

The women in this study defined mobility not merely as transportation, but as a moral, emotive and gendered negotiation in space, constructed socially as male.

Fatima expressed the embodied discomfort of being hyper-visible in public:

"مین روڈ پر مرد ایسے گھورتے ہیں جیسے ان کی آنکھوں میں ایکس رے مشین لگی ہو... سر سے پاؤں تک مجھے پرکھتے رہتے ہیں۔"

"On the main road, men stare as if they have an X-ray machine in their eyes... scanning me from head to toe."

These experiences can be compared with the work of Phadke (2007) who discusses the issue of Mumbai claiming that the social construct of a public space in South Asia is that of male space and that only under certain strict moral conditions women can be allowed to occupy the space. The eye turns into some disciplinary surveillance (Foucault, 1977), reminding women about their vulnerability and their out of place position.

Zobia reinforced this:

"It's the worst feeling to be constantly watched... people on bikes turn their faces to stare at me."

This is similar to the idea of the fear of crime proposed by Pain (2001), which demonstrates the way in which mobility of women has been determined by the expectations of being harassed, as opposed to being attacked. The high-risk gendered zone has been identified especially in Pakistan and India via public transport (A. Shoaib, 2025).

Ramsha added a cultural-religious dimension:

"Two women sitting so close to a man is against purdah... culturally considered immoral."

This is true to the reflection that Mahmood (2005) made of embodied modesty, purdah is not a practice but a moral geography of the body and space.

These gendered boundaries are also supported by male voices. Israr stated:

"گھر رہو تے آرام کرو... جدوں مرد کما رئے ہون تے باہر جانا تے مشکلات دا سامنا کرنا کیوں؟"

"Stay home and relax... why go outside and face hardships when men are earning?"

This parallels the concept of social containment voiced by Long (2020), according to which the cultural norms limit the movements of women by presenting the outside as unnatural and the home as being natural.

2: Workplace Inequalities and the Male Superiority Paradigm

Women complained that there existed a severe gender gap in the workplace.

Sumaiya described:

"Customers talk to us like we are dumb... but with male employees they behave delightfully."

This is in line with the idea of patriarchal bargaining proposed by Kandiyoti (1988), in which relations in society support the dominance of men and subordination of women. The feminine role of a woman in the workplace is frequently sabotaged due to the masculinization of authority in South Asian working societies (Kabeer, 2000).

Muhammad added:

"Male employees behave disrespectfully with female employees, like they are superior and dominant."

This fits the structure of hegemonic masculinity used by Connell (1995) in which the hierarchies of workplaces replicate male privilege in their daily interactions.

Bakhsh expressed deep anxieties about office spaces:

"میں نہیں چاہتا کہ میری دھیاں نوں دفتر اں وچ براساں کرن دا سامنا کرنا پوے۔"

"I don't want my daughters to face harassment in offices."

It is through the scope of the culture that harassment is associated with working conditions, which supports the stereotype that good women remain at home (Jeffery & Jeffery, 1996). These perceptions are at the heart of the way of honour-based societies to judge the labour of women.

3: Cultural Protectionism, Honor, and the Moral Regulation of Women's Labour

Narratives of protectionism were repeated several times.

Bakhsh stated:

جدوں توں اوہناں دے پیو تے بھرا جیوندے نے... میریاں دھیاں نوں نوکریاں کرن لئی ایدھر اودھر بھجن دی کوئی لوڑ نہیں۔ اپنی عزت نوں خطرے وچ پاؤن دی لوڑ کیوں؟

"Since their father and brothers are alive... my daughters have no need to run around doing jobs. Why risk our honour?"

In this case, izzat (honour) serves as a moral economy, which regulates the behaviour of women (Shaheed, 1999). The honour cultures of South Asia attribute the role of maintaining the family reputation on the female bodies and mobility (Abu-Lughod, 1999).

Israr strengthened protectionism:

"عورتاں نوں باہر کیوں جانا چاہیدا اے؟ گھر ای رہو... ایہہ اک عورت لئی سب توں محفوظ تھاں اے۔"

"Why should women go outside? Stay at home... this is the safest place for a woman."

The bodies of women are positioned as a space that requires protection, which strengthens the role of patriarchy (Khan, 2018).

Fatima described her mother's fear:

”میری والدہ ہر صبح آیت الکرسی پڑھتی ہیں... وہ کہتی ہیں کہ میری حفاظت صرف اللہ ہی کر سکتا ہے۔“

“Every morning my mother recites Ayat-ul-Kursi... she says only Allah can protect me.”

These types of religious practices resonate with the work of (Hirschkind, 2006) on the ethical soundscape rituals that foster moral selves and safeguard against social perceived threats.

Zoya added:

”لوگ کہتے ہیں کہ میں باہر رہنا پسند کرتی ہوں... کوئی یہ نہیں پوچھتا کہ میں کتنی بے بس ہوں۔“

“People say I like staying outside... no one asks how helpless I am.”

Her situation is representative of honour being forcefully enforced not only by the family, but by neighbourhoods and villages.

4: Economic Necessity and Gendered Compulsions

The opportunities of women into labour were seldom discussed as empowerment.

Zoya said:

“My husband's income is not enough... I had to start factory work.”

This is an indication of the fact that the labour force entry of women in South Asia is at a time when women are desperate to earn some money rather than an empowerment issue based on rights (Sen 1999).

Fatima similarly stated:

”ہمارے پاس پرائیویٹ وین کے لیے اتنے وسائل نہیں ہیں۔“

“We don't have enough resources for a private van.”

Gender is a cross-cutting issue with poverty, which exacerbates mobility, work, and safety vulnerabilities (Nandita and Sinha, 2020).

Muhammad added:

“Girls need independence more than men... but I didn't support office work because environments are unsafe.”

This is the essence of a paradox, as it is the economic necessity that compels women to leave the house, whereas cultural ideologies do not welcome such a decision. These are the main contradictions of South Asian gendered labour patterns (Kabeer, 2011).

5: Harassment, Surveillance, and the Everyday Production of Gendered Risk

Harassment was also universal among women interviewed.

Zobia said:

“A driver asked for my number... why would I give it to him?”

Fatima added:

”بہت سے لڑکے آوازیں کستے ہیں... اس سے انسان کا اعتماد ٹوٹ جاتا ہے۔“

"So many boys pass comments... it breaks a person's confidence."

Zoya captured the emotional toll:

"فحش نظروں کو نظر انداز کرنا بہت مشکل ہوتا ہے... مگر مجھے پھر بھی برداشت کرنا پڑتا ہے۔"

"Ignoring vulgar gazes is so difficult... but I have to bear it."

Such harassment of everyday life fits the definition of Vera-Gray (2018) of the male gaze that is associated with micro-violences and that, over time, develops into an understanding of security in women.

Muhammad reflected this cultural reality:

"I didn't support my sisters' office work because men treat women disrespectfully."

Harassment therefore serves as: A lived experience and a reason as to why the mobility of women should be curtailed. This is in line with the theory of continuum of sexual violence by Kelly (1988), which provides that harassment is not a solitary event, but a component of a larger system of gendered power.

Moreover, according to Ayesha Khan (2018), harassment in Pakistan is a normalized behavior in which the presence of women in the open areas is blamed - a mechanism of strengthening patriarchal authority.

Synthesis: Intersecting Moralities, Risks, and Gendered Power in Women's Everyday Lives

The stories collected during this research demonstrate how women mobility, labour, and presence in Punjab is determined through intricate interaction of the cultural morality, economic need, patriarchal ideology, and harassment in its daily manifestations. These experiences, together, constitute what we can refer to as a gendered moral-economic chronotope, a lived spatiotemporal world where risk, honour, religion, and survival all meet and create the daily lives of women. This chronotope is not just a question of single acts of harassment or personal limitations, just in the same way as Singer et al. (2021) refer to as syndemics. Rather it is the trended interaction of structural inequalities, cultural ideologies, and emotional labours that influence women mobility, labour, and future projections.

In the research, women referred to public space as morally charged ground, which is the same argument as Phadke (2007) that argues that the South Asian street is a socially produced masculine space. The fact that Fatima and Zobia refer to the X-ray stares and constant surveillance towards them brings back to Foucault (1977) idea of the disciplining gaze, in which merely being in the open is an embodied act of fear, expectation, and emotional management. Their experiences prove that the mobility is made moral, and the bodies of women are always assessed, monitored and disciplined. The moral geography to most respondents including Ramsha is directly associated with religious and cultural interpretation on modesty, which is in conformity to Mahmoods (2005) perception of modesty as an ethical practice embedded within society and not necessarily a rule.

At the same time, workplaces were not characterized as the spaces of empowerment rather than as the arenas of contested morality where women argue over their entitlement. The fact that Connell (1995) theorizes about hegemonic masculinity, or rather the natural prevalence of males in the institutional hierarchy, is reflected in Sumaiya when she describes the way customers treat the male employees more respectfully. The insults women are subjected to not only limit their career development but also serve as an excuse of not allowing them to be in such places at all. In cases where men such as Muhammad recognize gender inequality in the workplace and still chose to deter his sisters against working, they engage in patriarchal bargaining in which men take the cultural demands but respect the structural norms at the expense of women (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Protectionist ideologies became strong regulatory forces within the accounts of participants. To fathers such as Bakhsh and Israr protection is turned into a moral economy, which mixes female safety with household custody. Their words are akin to the analysis of Shaheed (1999) about izzat as a social currency that relates honour of the family to women behaviour and mobility. The bodies of women are made symbolic demarcations of the moral order; the possibility of going out to a public or a professional territory is perceived not only as dangerous but as a moral suspect. The fact that Ayat-ul-Kursi is recited daily by the mother of Fatima, can also be seen as an indication on how the religious practice is a kind of protective labour (Hirschkind, 2006) a reaction towards a perceived as being a morally threatening environment to women.

These moral expectations are complicated and made worse by economic realities. Zoya is especially representative of the interaction of gender and poverty. Similar to most women in low-income societies, she gets into the industry not out of a sense of empowerment but of material need, a trend that is well captured by Kabeer (2011) and Sen (1999) in South Asia. However, economic participation does not exempt her moral scrutiny, on the contrary, it subjects her to more community suspicion and surveillance at the workplace. The antagonistic forces, of having to financially rely on women to work and yet the culture of the time being judging them due to the act of doing so, is what Ali (2020) refers to as a moral contradiction of modernity.

Harassment is both an experience and a cultural account that warrants additional limitations on women. The experiences of women who have been subjected to unwanted remarks, requested to give out their phone numbers, and manifested gazes match Vera-Gray (2018) definition of the unwanted visibility when the female body is continuously placed in the position of publicity. Meanwhile, such men like Muhammad and Bakhsh exercise the threat of harassment to restrict the autonomy of women. This dynamic is indicative of the face-side to face-side of sexual violence in Kelly (1988) continuum, where everyday harassment is normalized and embedded in the structure of the world and therefore the fears of women are justified but at the same time exploited to punish them.

Combined, these stories indicate that the gendered risk matrix in Punjab controls the life of women in such a way that danger, both actual and perceived, creates a cycle of fear, limited agency, and moral judgment. Patriarchal norms, economic precarity, religious interpretations and community surveillance sustain this matrix. Similar to the syndemic concept of Singer (2021), which is the cumulative and interacting combination of factors, these issues create an experienced environment in which the mobility of women, their employment, and their dignity are negotiated continuously. Within this chronotope, all bus stops, workplace relationships, and community glances will be a component of a larger moral script, which will define the way women perceive themselves and the ways the society envisions them as fitting into it.

CONCLUSION

The testimonies provided by women in this work show that movement in Punjab is much more than a pragmatic gesture, it is very moral, emotional and political. The daily movements of women are influenced by compounded pressures: cultural demands of honour, family control, insufficient economic means, inequalities at their workplace, and daily harassment that makes fear normal. Meanwhile, women are not docile. They haggle, adjust, and survive, finding their way in balancing bankability and culture, between their own desires and societal judgment.

This research demonstrates that fear is not the weakness of an individual but a socially constructed state, which is supported by the patriarchal norms, structural voids, and community discourse, which associate female safety with constraint. Moral Troubled spaces Public and Professional spaces are contested moral spaces that require as well as police the visibility of women. Through an analysis of these intersections using feminist anthropology, stigma

theory, as well as the notion of surveillance and habitus, the study illustrates how the combination of gender, morality, risk and economic limitations contribute to women living in the realities that they are in.

Ultimately, the establishment of safer and more equal public spaces cannot be done only by developing infrastructures. It demands cultural change, breaking the honour-related fetters, re-inventing the legitimacy of women in the political sphere, and overcoming the normalizing effect of harassing them that propagates gendered fear. The centrality of women mobility to their dignity, independence, and economic prospects, necessitates the need to address these overlapping moral and structural challenges to bring about a significant social change.

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