

## **The Challenges Faced By Women in Blue-Collar Jobs**

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### **Abstract**

Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of women in the labor force where they are consistently making significant economic contributions. Despite constituting 39.3% of the labor force in Pakistan, women face numerous challenges in their workplaces due to societal norms, and behaviors. This study explores the challenges faced by women holding blue-collar jobs in educational institutions in Lahore, Pakistan. This qualitative research unveils a nuanced array of obstacles confronted by women employed in blue-collar positions. In-depth interviews were conducted with 15 female security guards and janitors, purposefully selected from two private higher educational institutions in Lahore. Thematic analysis was conducted and a total of four themes were extracted from the data. The findings expose a complex web of challenges that women in blue-collar jobs face including gender-based discrimination, the double burden of domestic and job responsibilities, unique restraints of blue-collar jobs and institutional facilities available to formal labor, and finally the significance of family support. Blue-collar jobs have been an arena of a male-dominated workforce. Women's participation in this sector has been understudied in Pakistan. The present study aims to highlight the unique

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challenges that are linked to blue-collar jobs and women's experiences of these issues.

**Keywords:** *Blue color jobs, women, double burden, challenges, Pakistan.*

## **Introduction**

Historically women entering the formal workforce have been viewed as a means of bringing about gender equality through economic empowerment (O'Sullivan, 2007). However, because the public sphere of the paid workforce had long been dominated by men with women doing mostly unpaid framework (Costa, 2000), women started facing unique difficulties in an economic institution not catering to gender diversity. The Industrial Revolution was a starting point for women gaining access to the formal workforce and it is also the cross-section at which gender inequalities in the labor market became visible (Caraway, 2007).

Women's presence in the workforce cannot be taken as enough evidence for economic emancipation as the struggles for equality and gender-based discrimination kept manifesting themselves in one way or the other. Be it the glass ceiling (Purcell et al., 2010; Powell & Butterfield, 2015), sex-segregated work and associated wage gaps (Hegewisch et al., 2010; Hesmondhalgh, 2015; Perales, 2013) harassment at the workplace (McDonald, 2012) or motherhood penalty (Baker, 2010) the arena of the paid workforce is no bed of roses for women.

A unique dimension of employment stratification that emerged due to the Industrial Revolution was the bifurcation of blue and white-collar jobs. White-collar jobs were equated with non-manual labor. They enjoyed more prestige in the industrialized societies as the emerging middle class which distinguished itself from the working blue-collar strata (Pérez-Ahumada et al., 2017).

Despite the feminization of the workforce, blue-collar jobs remained largely male-dominated as compared to white-collar jobs (England, 2010). England (2010) argues that the trend is due to the comparison women make with their previous women reference groups. If the reference groups (women of previous generation) have no financial resources women are more likely to take up blue collar jobs to advance that reference group but if the reference group is generating a financial income, then the way to stay one step ahead is to choose professions that offer upward mobility more than the other (white collar jobs). In doing so she links class as an important element in choosing the type of work by women.

Criticizing her views Barbara Bergmann (2010) highlights that women alone are not to be held responsible for not choosing blue collar jobs, there are other institutional; and societal factors at play such as lack of training and apprenticeship opportunities available to women to be eligible for and be accepted at blue collar workplaces. Explaining this uneven sex-segregation Berdahl and colleagues (2018) assert that physical labor has been a means for men to practice their hegemonic masculinity by excluding women and non-hegemonic men. There has been theorizing about the trend, but the fact remains that despite women entering the occupational category, blue-collar jobs are still male-dominated.

### **Literature Review**

According to the Asian Development Bank (2016), the trend of the participation of women in the formal workforce in Pakistan is grim (Tanaka, 2016). Conservative cultural beliefs, family values, and lack of legal protection at the workplace are some of the barriers that hinder women's entry into the formal workforce in Pakistan (Raza, 2007). The cultural, legal, and political factors discriminate the position of women (Moulabuksh, 2022).

Despite these constraints, 34.5% of women were part of the formal workforce in 2021 as compared to 29.5% in 2019 majority of who are associated with agriculture as compared to the industry or services sector (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021).

Blue-collar jobs are characterized by long working hours (Cha, 2013), physical labor (Torre, 2019), and sometimes health risks. (Andersen et al., 2016; Clougherty et al., 2011). Women in unskilled blue-collar jobs often face a lack of work-life balance and highlight that the relationship between work and life are demanding (Cowan & Bochantin, 2011). Clougherty and colleagues (2010) highlighted that there might be a few women as compared to men in the blue-collar jobs but in the unskilled blue-collar jobs women are overrepresented, They also pointed to an uneven prevalence of hypertension among women paid on an hourly basis as compared to their male counterparts. In a scoping review of research studies conducted between 1990 to 2015, Elser and colleagues (2018) highlighted that the negative health outcomes have been more prevalent among women in blue-collar jobs as compared to blue-collar males. Peetz & Murray (2016) noted that due to the heavily gendered working space, women often had a greater fear of workplace harassment as compared to men in blue-collar jobs. Additionally, mothers in blue-collar jobs find it extremely difficult to manage both household and work responsibilities (Schroedel, 2013).

In Pakistan, a significant hindrance in women's participation in formal workforce is the patriarchal culture that considers the man of the house as breadwinner and discourages women to work for wages. The burden of household responsibilities falls almost completely on the shoulder of women which hampers their access to formal work outside homes (Moulabuksh et al., 2022). Cultural norms such as the significance of *Purdah* also serve as a

justification to keep women within the realm of informal and unpaid household responsibilities (Khan, 2007). Gender based wage discrimination also exists in blue-collar jobs in Pakistan which affects the productivity of the employees (Abbas et al., 2010). As for married women, the primary role of mothers and homemakers takes precedence over paid work. Zulfiqar and colleagues (2023) highlighted that the lack of support in managing both the roles of employees and mothers was highlighted as a main reason for women to quit the formal workforce.

### **Significance of the Study**

The representation of Pakistani women in the formal workforce is far from ideal. Limited number of women that do step outside their homes to earn a living face myriad of challenges which are cultural, social and legal in nature. Within the formal workforce the blue-collar work is an extremely challenging arena for Pakistani women to intervene due to its male dominant nature. It is important to understand the challenges faced by Pakistani women who dare to enter the unskilled blue collar industry.

### **Research Objectives**

- To understand the problems and obstacles that female blue-collar workers encounter at the workplace.
- To highlight their experiences of blue-collar work and associated cultural barriers. to highlight the facilitators that play a role in maintaining blue collar jobs.

### **Research Questions**

Q 1: What are the problems and obstacles that blue-collar working women encounter at the workplace?

Q2: What facilitators support women in blue-collar professions?

## **Methodology**

A qualitative research approach was used to attain a rich and detailed account of the experiences of women working in blue-collar jobs at two private universities in Lahore. The purpose of adopting the qualitative research design was to get an in-depth understanding of the issues faced by women performing blue-collar jobs. The research was conducted with an interpretive approach. This research method focuses on understanding subjective experiences rather than simply observing facts. Interpretive researchers seek to explain and understand sociological data. They interpret life and society through human experiences. The interpretive approach represents a theoretical standpoint within social science research that underscores the significance of comprehending and centering on individuals who grapple with daily life challenges.

It also underscores the influence of work styles on their lives and the prevalence of stereotypical perceptions within the workplace, for this purpose the female security guards and sweepers were approached from two private universities in Lahore: The University of Central Punjab and the University of Management & Technology. This research involved 15 women workers using purposive sampling technique for data collection. Securing participants' consent for the study proved to be a challenging initial step, primarily due to their concerns that their interviews might be used to provide feedback to the university, potentially affecting their employment.

To cater to the participants' preferences and alleviate any concerns, we collaborated closely with them to identify convenient venues and suitable interview schedules. Consequently, the interviews were carried out in diverse settings. Moreover, data were collected from the five sweepers and security guards who had the experience of working in the same job for at least 4 years.

To conduct the interviews, the participants' preferences were prioritized. The researchers collaborated closely with them to identify convenient places and suitable interview schedules. The interviews took place on the university premises during their lunch break and some interviews were conducted after the completion of duty hours and, in some cases, the administration's office. Keeping in view the fact that all participants may not understand English or Urdu the researchers cater to the linguistic preferences of the participants, the interviews were conducted in both Urdu and Punjabi language.

All the collected interviews were accurately transcribed by the researchers before to translate into English. All the transcriptions were thoroughly examined, comprising many readings, along with the field notes. The purpose of this rigorous process was to identify recurrent patterns, developing themes and the underlying narratives included within the participant's responses. In this way, the study explored the complex layers that make up the participants' experiences as well as the larger socio-spatial dynamics that underlie these contained areas.

## **Findings**

The themes that emerged in the present research are as follows:

### **Role Conflict**

All of the participants agreed that they faced role conflict. Six participants of the research did double shifts. In addition to spending 10 hours in a job, they earn through home-cooked tiffin services, stitching, and knitting. One of the participants said, "My husband is unable to fulfill the needs of the whole family due to high inflation, I stitch female dresses to support my

husband if we look at the current scenario it is hard to overcome the economic burden”.

Respondents have stated that their devotion to providing for their family is what drives them to take on a taxing dual workload in these inflation-ridden times. This dedication extends to their caregiving obligations for their husbands, kids, in-laws, and household duties. The preparation of breakfast for their families and early morning housework are the participants' first daily tasks, which they have revealed in-depth insights into. They then take care of things like making sure their kids are ready for school and packing lunches for their husbands and kids. They must promptly begin their work-related commitments after completing these duties. Participants occasionally had to pick up their kids from school after finishing their shifts. As a result, they are forced to balance other unfinished domestic tasks with the arduous task of making meals. One of the participants' stated:

“Double burden term frequently used to illustrate the challenges a woman or a mother has to face where she is balancing both domestic responsibilities and balancing employment. I am not satisfied that I am unable to give quality time to my children. But at the same time, I become inspirational for them”

Some mothers receive assistance from their female offspring to overcome these obstacles, and they also make contributions by working from home to generate an income. These activities range from diverse home-based jobs like delivering lunches to making and selling crafts.

A major issue faced by Pakistani working women is work-family conflict. They find that Work and family life demands multiple tasks from women. The key factors that lead to work-family conflict are long working



hours, family expectations, having younger kids, lack of spousal support, and the time management of working women.

All of the participants were married and had children. All of them agreed that they neglect their children because of work. They said that their job timing is 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and they reach home around 7 p.m. Then they don't have much time to spend with their children and only have weekends to spend quality time with family. However, on weekends they have to do other pending tasks like (washing clothes, meeting relatives, and maintaining and cleaning the house)

A participant said: "I am satisfied with my job I also feel that children are being neglected and everything has pros and cons if children are being neglected but at the same time we secure their future and fulfill their basic needs"

### **Gender Based Hurdles**

When asked about being paid equally as men. One of the participants said, "We are not equally paid as men because they are retired soldiers also, they worked more hours than us that's why they are paid more "The rest of the staff (sweeper) are being paid equally as men".

When asked about mobility issues like harassment and stalking they said they sometimes encounter issues like that when they are traveling alone. As some of them use public transport they face harassment in the form of inappropriate touch which makes them uncomfortable. None of them take action against it.

One of the participants said "Many families don't allow a woman to go alone in auto. Especially after the Maghreb time and some of us come home at night, one night when I was coming back from job one stalker followed me

which was terrified after that night, I always try to come with any family member, colleague”.

Issues of harassment in public transport are faced by many Pakistani women. In terms of blue-collar work, unsafe travelling conditions make it more difficult for women to reach their workplaces. This response is not related to the nature of blue-collar work per se but since the respondents belong to semi-skilled or unskilled blue-collar workforce, socioeconomic class leaves them less choice but to travel by public transport. Access to workplace is also an important arena to highlight for women in blue-collar occupations.

The participants all agreed that they experienced household limitations at the beginning of their careers. Six respondents met these limitations directly, whereas the other participants did so through familial expectations. Deeply ingrained gender stereotypes generally place the major burden of managing domestic duties on women in Pakistani culture. For a long time, these cultural conventions have put heavy obligations on women. But since they are committed to providing for their families and preparing a better future for their children, many women find themselves forced to take up these duties in the context of our modern society's evolution and the ongoing inflation crisis.

It is critical to emphasize that women must also deal with unfavorable views and unpleasant remarks from female family members in addition to the oppressive restrictions placed on them by male family members. This stresses the idea that female exploitation sometimes results from a lack of cooperation and support among female family members rather than coming primarily from men.

In addition to the lack of understanding and support from families, women's work options in a variety of sectors are also declining. Due to these

ongoing restrictions, they increasingly find themselves limited to positions that are historically held by women.

One of the participants said, “My family was concerned with what opinion the society will hold regarding women that they are incapable of performing in these professions which are associated with men. I never heard direct negative comment; they criticized me in my absence. I don’t have much support from my family and I also don’t have another option I have to do it because of my children to support and provide them a better life”

### **Work-related Restraints and Available Facilities**

#### **Unpaid Overtime**

The respondents highlighted that they have to do unpaid overtime occasionally. The salary is fixed for every individual. Like many private institutions, they pay employees for every extra hour of work but the respondents mentioned that the institutions they work for don’t have an overtime payment policy and participants are just provided their monthly fixed salary. Participants stated that if the institutes want them to work for extra hours, they just follow their instructions and don’t ask them to pay for the additional time.

One of the participants said, “I do a job as a guard lady, sometimes I have to do overtime when the institute organizes an event but don’t pay for it. They don’t give the transport services but for that day they provide it which is free of cost”

#### **Self-care**

Although they have not mentioned any serious health issues, participants occasionally feel mentally exhausted. They can occasionally feel worn out due to their busy schedules, which frequently involve 10-hour workdays, home-based income-generating activities (such as sewing and

cooking), and the duties of caring for children, husbands, and in-laws in addition to household tasks. There have been some reports of stress and headaches, but none of the more significant mental health conditions like depression, anxiety, or eating disorders have been mentioned. A few people also reported having back pain, which they blamed on things like getting too little sleep.

One of the participants said “My duty hours is 9 to 10 which is hectic for me and also take care of family, and children. We don’t have much time to take care of our health and skin. Due to Lack of sleep, I am having dark circles which is concerning for me”

They mentioned that they are doing jobs and also managing the house, husband, children, society, and social ties. To manage all of these they spend more energy and time to give their best. Due to workload and time issues, they face mental health issues sometimes. They are allowed to take only two sick leaves, after two days of leave, the institution starts deduction from pay.

### **Facilities provided by the institution**

All of the participants agreed that the institution gives beneficial services to every staff. The research participants were satisfied with private organizations. They said that they felt comfortable in the organization because they have many facilities like paid maternity leaves, job security, health facilities, and a friendly environment between colleagues and students. Also, doing a job in an institution is better than working as a housemaid. They mentioned that they work with dignity no one in the institution discriminates against them based on class, job, or religion.

One of the participants said,

“I am satisfied with my job. For a long time, I have done work in house I have faced humiliating behavior and harassment too. But when I

joined this institution, I enjoyed this job and the services that are given by this institution one of these is to give 4 months off for IDAH one of our colleagues took this leave which is also paid and when she joined again, she came to her old position with same pay”

All of the participants agreed that the institution gives therapy and counseling sessions. However, only one of the participants used this facility. Commenting on her experience she said

This institution gives therapy sessions to students and staff members I took 2 therapy sessions when my husband died, and I was in depression one of the students suggested me and took me to the counseling office. Professors of clinical psychology do counseling. She guides me death is a natural process every human will face so you should move out and focus on you and your children because now they need you more”

### **Role of Family Support**

Participants elucidated that not everyone enjoys the luxury of a supportive family environment, and they candidly recounted their personal experiences, which shed light on the considerable criticism they endured from their family members. These critiques often took the form of derogatory or harsh remarks, encompassing the weight of societal expectations. However, one of the participants highlighted that she had a source of support at home from a male family member and that it helped a lot in managing the responsibilities of household and workplace. Sharing the burden of household work is a simple step that has a profound impact on the daily struggles of women. One of the participants said,

“After the death of my husband I am the only one who earns and supports the family. My father-in-law also supports me he never judges my job or makes negative remarks when I am late. He also takes care

of children when I am on the job, He brings the children from school and tuition and sometimes cooks food for us. That is very helpful for me.”

Table 1: Summary of themes extracted from the data.

<b>Themes</b>	<b>Indicative Statements</b>
Role conflict	<p>“My husband is unable to fulfill the needs of the whole family due to high inflation, I stitch female dresses to support my husband if we look at the current scenario it is hard to overcome the economic burden”.</p> <p>Double burden term frequently used to illustrate the challenges a woman or a mother has to face where she is balancing both domestic responsibilities and balancing employment. I am not satisfied that I am unable to give quality time to my children. But at the same time, I become inspirational for them”</p> <p>“I am satisfied with my job I also feel that children are being neglected and everything has pros and cons if children are being neglected but at the same time we secure their future and fulfill their basic needs”</p>
Role of Family Support	<p>“After the death of my husband, I am the only one who earns and supports the family. My father-in-law also supports me he never judges my job or makes negative remarks when I am late. He also takes care of children when I am on the job, He brings the children from school and tuition and sometimes cooks food for us. That is very helpful for me.”</p>

	<p>“Many families don't allow a woman to go alone in auto. Especially after the Maghreb time and some of us come home at night, one night when I was coming back from job one stalker followed me which was terrified after that night, I always try to come with any family member, colleague”.</p>
Gender based discrimination	<p>“My family was concerned with what opinion the society will hold regarding women that they are incapable of performing in these professions which are associated with men. I never heard direct negative comments, they criticized me in my absence. I don't have much support from my family and I also don't have another option I have to do it because of my children to support and provide them a better life”</p> <p>“We are not equally paid as men because they are retired soldiers also, they worked more hours than us that's why they are paid more “The rest of the staff (sweeper) are being paid equally as men”.</p>
Work-related restraints and available facilities	<p>“I do a job as a guard lady, sometimes I have to do overtime when the institute organizes an event but don't pay for it. They don't give the transport services but for that day they provide it which is free of cost”</p> <p>“My duty hours is 9 to 10 which is hectic for me and also take care of family, and children. We don't have much time to take care of our health and skin. Due to Lack of</p>

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sleep, I am having dark circles which is concerning for me”

“This institution gives therapy sessions to students and staff members I took 2 therapy sessions when my husband died, and I was in depression one of the students suggested me and took me to the counseling office. Professors of clinical psychology do counseling. She guides me death is a natural process every human will face so you should move out and focus on you and your children because now they need you more”

“I am satisfied with my job. For a long time, I have done work in house I have faced humiliating behavior and harassment too. But when I joined this institution, I enjoyed this job and the services that are given by this institution one of these is to give 4 months off for IDAH one of our colleagues took this leave which is also paid and when she joined again, she came to her old position with same pay”

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## **Discussion**

The present study focused on some of the challenges of women in blue-collar occupations in Pakistan. The study focused on 15 women who were part of semi-skilled and unskilled blue-collar work. The findings highlight that role conflict is one of the major issues faced by blue-collar women. Long working hours leave them less room to fulfill their domestic responsibilities, which are usually not shared by other family members. Chen and colleagues (2007) noted that even if married women experience upward mobility and wage



improvement in formal workforce that is not translated into reduction in the domestic responsibilities. Double-burden remains a source of stress for women irrespective of them being in blue-collar or white-collar occupations. However, in blue-collar occupations women have less flexibility in terms of hours which creates additional challenge for them to balance work and household responsibilities (Jacobs & Padavic, 2015).

The findings of this study highlight the cultural barriers that blue-collar working women face in the lives. Harassment, unequal wages and stereotyping were few of the issues that stem from the patriarchal nature of Pakistani society. Yong et al., (2019) highlighted that harassment faced in transportation can have negative outcomes for women's participation in the workforce in Pakistan. As for sex differences in wages, Abbas et al. (2010) highlighted that the experience or perception of gender discrimination in wages has a direct impact on worker's productivity which in turn is linked to their job satisfaction.

According to the findings of the present study, a significant facilitator for women in blue-collar jobs was the support of family in helping them manage work-life conflict. Ahmad and Ali (2011) highlighted that social support has a direct positive relationship with work-life balance for working women in Pakistan. The present study shows that women working in blue-collar jobs would benefit greatly from supportive households. The respondents in the present study preferred formal work over informal domestic work because of the benefits that accompany formal labor. Therefore, a little support from family can go a long way for women to retain their employment.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study focuses on female blue-collar workers in specific private universities in Lahore, Pakistan. The findings may not be representative of the experiences of all female blue-collar workers in Pakistan or other countries.

The study briefly mentions the challenges faced by female blue-collar workers but does not provide a variety of solutions to address these challenges. A more in-depth study is required to address the challenges faced by female blue-collar-workers (Imam et al., 2023).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to explore the situation of blue-collar working women in private educational institutions. The findings of the study show that research participants face unique challenges owing to the nature of their work. Long working hours and difficulty in managing work and household responsibilities is one of the biggest concerns of the respondents. Women also highlighted the guilt of neglecting their children due to their demanding jobs. They did preferred formal employment over informal work as formal labor provides security and benefits. The respondents highlighted that family support plays a great role in the positive experience of blue-collar jobs.

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