

Breaking barriers on two wheels: Socio-Cultural implications for rising women's mobility in Pakistan

Zainab Shahid, Supervisor: Aeron O'Connor

Department of Risk and Disaster Reduction, University College London



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Introduction:

In Pakistan, high poverty rates mean motorbikes are the most common mode of transport (Zulfiqar, 2020). Yet women face stigma, harassment, and family restrictions when riding a two-wheeler that limit their independence and access to public spaces (GLM LIC, 2018). Recently, however, a growing number of women in cities like Lahore have begun riding motorbikes, challenging cultural norms and creating new opportunities for mobility (Mujtaba, 2022).

Methodology:

This research focused on middle-class women in Lahore, Pakistan. Participants were divided into two groups based on their mobility situation: women who ride motorbikes and women who are dependent on public transport or male relatives. Semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions were organized with each category of women. These were all audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis. Participants have been pseudonymized to protect their privacy.



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Research Findings:

- Female motorbike riders face harassment, **social stigma**, and even violence, but many actively resist and reclaim agency.
- Motorbike riders **legitimize mobility** through family trust, spousal support, or religious narratives (such as linking bike riding to women who rode horses in early Islamic era). They also adapt to cultural expectations by wearing traditional clothing.
- Female motorbike riders enjoy greater independence in **social lives** while other women rely on “collective social lives,” going out only in groups for safety and acceptance.
- **Work and education** are more accessible for female motorbike riders, who save time and costs, while non-riders face financial/logistical burdens.
- **Domestic roles:** Female motorbike riders take on some traditionally male responsibilities at home while non-riders remain tied to conventional responsibilities.

Mujtaba, M. (2022) 'More and more women motorcyclists in Pakistan are whizzing past the patriarchy', Arab News PK, 29 July. Available at: <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/2131586> (Accessed: 10 January 2025).

Sajjad, F., Anjum, G.A., Field, E. and Vyborny, K. (2018) 'Overcoming Barriers to Women's Mobility'. Gender, Growth and Labour Markets in Low Income Countries Programme. Available at: <https://g2lm-lic.iza.org/publications/pb/pb24/> (Accessed: 9 January 2025).

Zulfiqar, F. (2020) 'Public Transportation System and Female Mobility in Pakistan'. PIDE. Available at: <https://pide.org.pk/research/public-transportation-system-and-female-mobility-in-pakistan-2/> (Accessed: 9 January 2025).