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

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"When I started riding a motorbike, relatives ridiculed my family saying I have too much freedom, but now they all say, 'this is how you should raise a daughter' because I'm able to do everything on my own without depending on anyone else." *(Areeba, Motorbike rider)*

Introduction:

Most Pakistanis use motorbikes as the main mode of transportation (Zulfiqar, 2020) since income inequality is high and approximately 44.72% of population is under the poverty line (World Bank, 2025). However, women have long been stigmatized for riding motorbikes and scooters ('two-wheelers') due to cultural and religious influences disenfranchising them from education, employment and public spaces in general (Sajjad et al., 2018:1). However, there has been a rising trend of female motor bikers challenging cultural norms in Pakistan's main cities (Mujtaba, 2022), encouraging women's freedom of mobility. This research aims to understand the impact of female bike-riding on women's domestic, work and social lives and to compare it to the lifestyles of women who are dependent on public transport or male relatives for their mobility.

The sociologist Kaufmann (2014: 7) defines mobility as "*the intention and realization of an act of movement in physical space that involves social change*". This emphasizes that mobility is not limited to physical displacement but also encompasses the aspirations and projects that precede movement. For Kaufmann, not every act of travel counts as mobility: buying bread at the corner shop is merely movement, whereas migrating or commuting long distances for work becomes mobility because it transforms one's social position, identity, or life situation. In this sense, mobility is simultaneously spatial and social.

Methodology

This research focuses on middle-class women in Lahore, Pakistan who have a higher education or are currently at university. Urban, middle-class women tend to have more access to mobility, making them a useful demographic for this project. Anthropologist Papanek (1971:522) argues that urban middle-class women and female students tend to be more self-confident because they have relatively more mobility and exposure to the outside world. This iteratively helps them have better mobility for accessing further economic and social opportunities. Through these women's stories we can situate the experiences of other members of society, though their accounts – already very varied in themselves - are far from representative of all Pakistani women.

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 1-1 interviews were conducted with women from both categories, and, separately, a focus-group discussion was organized with each category of women. These were all audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis. Participants have been pseudonymized to protect their privacy.

Findings:

Challenges to female mobility:

Women who ride motorbikes in Lahore confront constant street harassment and even violence on the roads (Abdullah et al., 2025). Participants described frequent incidents of men catcalling, staring, or in extreme cases, attempting to injure them. Farah and Anisa, who began riding seven years ago when it was far less accepted, recounted how men in cars deliberately hit their bikes, causing serious injuries. Farah suffered two such accidents and only recently recovered from a broken kneecap. Beyond physical harm, these experiences take a psychological toll. As Farah explains: *"**Overtime, I became a society-conscious person when I started realizing why men were staring at me and what they were thinking. This gave me trauma**."* Such normalized violence against women echoes what anthropologist Billaud (2015: 12-13) terms the "carnivalesque" nature of society, where narratives of progress and rights clash with an everyday reality of patriarchal control. In Pakistan, the annual Aurat March (Hussain, 2021) embodies women's rights discourse, but it exists alongside conservative cultural norms that constrain women's presence in public spaces.

Despite these dangers, many women refuse to remain passive and actively resist harassment. Confronting aggressors not only allows them to reclaim agency, but also often garners support from bystanders. Mahnoor recalls: ***"Once I was going on my bike with my friend when someone on another bike touched my friend on the back. We both hurled curses at him loudly. The guy ran away in fear."*** Similarly, Sadia recounted how confronting a man who chased and catcalled her led to other men intervening and punching the harasser. These stories highlight moments of empowerment, where women transform spaces of threat into sites of justice, albeit informally and precariously.

For women who do not ride motorbikes, the challenges of mobility take different but overlapping forms. Social stigmas remain constant, economic and logistical barriers become more pronounced. These challenges are well-explained by Maryam: "***My family-driver is often unable to pick me when I've [in] evening classes at university, and I have to book a ride-share. There is always uncertainty that the driver might cancel my ride and I've to wait 40-50***

minutes on the road alone at night before a driver accepts my ride and reaches me." Maryam also mentions how ride prices often surge during evening and morning rush-hours. Such excess costs make regular mobility unsustainable, while public transport is often unreliable and unsafe.

Negotiating access to mobility:

Women who ride motorbikes in Lahore negotiate access to mobility through complex and often strategic engagements with prevailing social norms. Many riders legitimize their position by gaining their family's support and/or grounding their right to mobility in religious accounts of women's liberation, thereby situating their practice within socially acceptable frameworks. Paradoxically, these women often adhere even more strictly to dominant norms surrounding femininity—particularly those emphasizing modesty, the preservation of family honor, and the fulfillment of traditional domestic responsibilities. As one participant reflected: "***We need to recognize how much trust our family has put in us by allowing us to be on the road alone. So, we need to make sure we don't break their trust and don't embarrass the family name.***"

Ayesha, for instance, had long aspired to ride a motorbike but encountered significant resistance due to her position as a married woman and daughter-in-law, roles heavily constrained by notions of respectability. Her riding only gained legitimacy when it became tied to caregiving responsibilities, specifically providing transportation for her diabetic son to school and hospital appointments. In this context, the motorbike was framed not as a tool of individual autonomy but as a practical necessity for fulfilling maternal and familial duties. Over time, however, Ayesha expanded her use of the motorbike beyond these obligations, joining group rides and evening gatherings.

Ayesha mentions, "***Husband's support is necessary because people say all sorts of things if you are a woman who rides a motorbike, but having your husband on your side shuts their mouths right up. Who are they to say anything when my husband has no problem with it?***". This illustrates how women secure legitimacy by framing their actions within religiously and culturally sanctioned roles—obedient wife, dutiful mother, or responsible and respectable daughter. The discourse of spousal permission, for instance, simultaneously reinscribes male authority and enables women's participation in public life. Such strategies reveal the paradox of emancipation through conformity: by consciously or unconsciously invoking patriarchal narratives, women carve out avenues of mobility without directly threatening the moral order. At the same time, the framing of motorbike riding as an exceptional response to pressing needs underscores the pragmatic orientation of Pakistani society, where women's autonomy is tolerated only under conditions of necessity, lest they be labeled *awaara* (rogue).

Religious discourse further functions as a resource for legitimization. Many women refer to religious accounts to prove that their access to mobility via bike riding is supported by Islam. For instance, one participant mentions: "***During early days of Islam, Muhammad's wives and female family members used to ride horses fiercely which was the same as riding two wheelers. However, now they say it is against modesty. If that was the case women wouldn't have been allowed to ride horses like that back then."*** Such narratives challenge traditional interpretations of modesty while simultaneously grounding women's practices in religious precedent, thereby offering a culturally resonant justification for mobility.

Women who don't ride motorbikes negotiate their access to mobility by bargaining on other grounds including being financially independent, providing financially for their family or just pursuing higher education, which sometimes act as gateways for women to gain further freedom in society and at home. This emancipation means, for instance, being able to go out with friends because their family trusts them, or, for Aiza, "***Sometimes work becomes a coping mechanism, as this enables me to leave home when I need my space***".

Gender and the body:

In a society where gender is considered a fundamental part of a functional society and responsibilities of an individual are strictly gendered, independent access to mobility can mean a significant change in your gendered identity and how you orient your body.

In typical Pakistani culture, the burden of carrying over traditions is placed heavily on women. In Pakistani society, 'family honor' is highly associated with the modesty in women's clothing (Mohsin et al. 2021: 2932). It is socially acceptable for men to dress according to occasion, like wearing western-style trousers and t-shirts on motorbikes, but women must wear *shalwar kameez* (long sleeve-dress and trousers) and a *chaddar* (loose cloth that covers head and upper body) or *abaya* (full-length outer garment) regardless of the activity or event they partake in. This hinders women's access to mobility because wearing flowy clothes while riding a two-wheeler can be dangerous as it risks getting stuck in the motorbike chain or tires. If women choose more practical attire, it is often perceived as immodest and can provoke criticism of their character by strangers and family alike.

Sara, who rides a motorbike, shared her account of dressing: "***My brother didn't like me wearing tight trousers. I accepted it because it was coming from a place of love.***" She now wears an *abaya* while riding a motorbike but folds it up to make it easy for her to ride and avoid tripping from the motorbike. Women like her come up with innovative solutions to adapt their

bodily presentation to conform to cultural nuances all the while ensuring their access to mobility. Some women cope with this by opting for niche fashion like only wearing black outfits that are a mix of eastern and western clothing, like above-knee shirts and wide-legged jeans.

While most women who ride motorbikes adapt and try to adhere to social norms, many remain unapologetically themselves and priorities their personal preferences, be it wearing traditional *shalwar qameez* with *jhumkas* (large, bell-shaped earrings) or wearing trousers and shirts. Of course, their varying capacity to prioritize their own opinions comes from how supportive their families are of them. Conversely, women who do not ride motorbikes tend to enjoy greater flexibility in their dressing, as their lifestyle does not render them as susceptible to public scrutiny or judgement.

Social Life:

Women who don't ride motorbikes have varying degrees of access to social lives due to a spectrum of reasons including difficulties in managing logistics of transportation and/or restrictive family values. Such women deal with travel anxieties daily. Those who rely on male family members or a driver must follow a strict and pre-decided schedule for their transport from work/college, leaving little possibility for going out with friends after work or class. It is also rather difficult to go to social events because family members or family drivers are preoccupied with other tasks through the day. Maryam explains: "***When you depend on someone for your mobility, then you only focus on fulfilling your basic needs like going to doctor's appointment or to university. Your recreation/social life becomes a second priority***".

This has led to a unique mobility arrangement where women primarily rely on other friends who can pick them up and drop them off. This generates *collective social lives*. We use this term because such women have very dynamic social lives and go out to coffee shops, social events and movies almost every other day but only with a big group of friends, one of whom has access to mobility either via driving their own car, or through a family-trusted rickshaw. Many women find safety in numbers and even make use of car-hailing apps for mobility which they otherwise wouldn't use alone. In that way, their access to social lives becomes 'collective' as they go out only when and where their group of friends can. This was especially evident with one participant who even came to the interview with a group of six college friends who were all carpooling to go out for coffee together.

Family-imposed restrictions also cause hindrances to mobility because of societal stigmas surrounding women enjoying their social lives. Many of our participants mentioned they can't go out to meet friends on consecutive days because it indicates that they are too "outgoing"

and their parents won't allow this kind of behavior, afraid that neighbors and relatives will label them *awaara* (rogue), putting family honor at risk. One of the participants who is raising her one-year-old daughter shared how 'mom-guilt' also comes into play when you want to go out with friends. Mothers are considered the primary caregiver and so if they go out too often, they are perceived to abandon their responsibilities. This leads to labels of "careless mother", creating mental and social barriers to women's mobility.

Women who ride motorbikes have fought off these labels and feel freer in going out for recreational and work purposes. Many riders who participated in this research were connected to bike riding communities which acted as safe spaces for them to socialize and find likeminded people.

We also came across several 'women supporting women networks' as most of the female bike riders had stories of teaching several other women to ride motorbikes. One participant had taught about 50+ women to ride a motorbike. She explained: "***I used to see a woman in her 50s in the neighborhood going to drop her kids to school. She would be losing her breath while walking hurriedly, often with her children. I taught her how to ride a motorbike. Now she has a bike on which she provides pick and drops to her children***." Another participant also mentioned she used to take her school friend to college visits for admissions and then continued to take and collect her from college every day.

Work Life:

Experiences of women in their work or university lives were similar for both cohorts. Cultural influences exist that both groups navigate such as home responsibilities restraining them from pursuing a full-time job and cultural narratives that stigmatize women being outside home for long hours. Many women shared similar accounts of hearing phrases like: "***Log kiya kahien gy (What will people say?)***" when they had to be outside home for long/late night work hours. Even when women strategize around these constraints, such control highlights how cultural norms continue to police women's access to mobility.

Women who ride motorbikes find it easier to work or study outside home. Anisa's travel time decreased from 1.5 hours on public transport to merely 20 minutes on her bike while pursuing her Bachelors. When it comes to women who don't ride motorbikes, logistical challenges in accessing work opportunities become more pronounced. Ameera, for example, spent 10,000 PKR (around £27) on a ride-hailing service on a one-day work trip to the suburbs—equivalent to a quarter of Pakistan's monthly minimum wage. But at the same time, we came across women with exceptional work lives that they manage regardless of mobility restrictions. For instance,

Aimen works remotely with a US-based company, leads a community-based initiative on women's wellbeing, and acts as the primary caregiver for two children. She doesn't ride motorbikes but describes herself as a 'hardcore feminist'.

Domestic Life:

Many of the female bikers mentioned how they were the "son of the family" or that their family treats them like a 'son'. This indicates how a change in mobility had a direct relation to their gendered identity, thereby causing a shift in family responsibilities. While the discourse around feeling like a son didn't indicate an actual change in gender identity but rather a symbolic change in their role as a family member and a shift in their status in the hierarchal family system. In a humorous reflection, Sarah stated that: "***Now my parents ask me to go get milk and eggs from the grocery store instead of my brother***" indicating a shift away from traditional gender roles where women were often restricted to the domestic sphere.

Farah's story also sheds light on this shift: born into a family with six daughters and no sons, she feels like the son of the family. She wakes up at 6:00 am to drop her elder sister at the bus stop by motorbike and pick her up later in the evening. She also regularly helps her little sister go out with friends or get to school.

Women who don't ride motorbikes tend to have conventional family responsibilities including making breakfast, helping around the house and babysitting younger siblings or looking after their own children. This is not to say however that women who rely on rides or public transportation don't go beyond traditional family roles. Aiza, for instance, not only regularly cares for her younger sister and contributes to household responsibilities but is also pursuing a law degree while undertaking an internship at a law firm – all without access to a motorbike.

Conclusion

Before concluding, I will draw some points of reflection. I started this project with a strict comparative approach focused on social, family and work life, but ended up with rich qualitative data and an insightful account that was difficult to fit into neat categories. I realize now that I expected black and white answers, but binaries don't exist in our dynamic reality. Women indeed face several constraints when it comes to accessing mobility, yet seeing these women, both those who do and don't ride motorbikes, confidently reclaiming public spaces made me understand there is more to their story than what meets the eye. The accounts of trauma, resilience, and empowerment taught me that mobility is not only about logistics but also about psychological wellbeing, confidence, and identity as women continue to sustain their social, work, and family lives despite persistent challenges.

This research builds on to Kaufmann's definition of mobility as a realization of social change since women's mobility in Pakistan is both a physical act and a negotiation with cultural, religious, and gendered norms. While riding a motorbike enhances a woman's access to mobility, it is not a one-stop solution as female bikers face new challenges that hinder their mobility in new ways. Nevertheless, they carve out independence by strategically legitimizing their identity through embracing family values, maintaining socially acceptable ideas of modesty and reinforcing their understanding of religion. Women who don't ride motorbikes manage economic, logistical, and safety constraints by travelling in groups of friends or with family-trusted individuals. Yet across both groups, resilience and resourcefulness are evident: women mobilize their networks, adapt their identity, and reshape family roles to navigate an often-times restrictive landscape.

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