

Ageing Experiences of Older Working Women in Punjab Pakistan

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Abstract

The ageing population is on the rise globally. Following retirement, individuals in their old age often rely on others to meet their socioeconomic needs. Nonetheless, the post-retirement ageing experiences of this segment of society, especially women, are underrepresented in the existing literature. The current study investigates the ageing experiences of older women from Lahore, Multan, and Rawalpindi to fill this gap while employing qualitative research methodology. In-depth interviews with older working women produced three themes: work as identity, socio-cultural dynamics, and the challenges of ageing and work. Engaging in work after retirement proved advantageous for maintaining financial independence and fostering active involvement in civic affairs. Nevertheless, these women encountered numerous socio-cultural obstacles. Obstacles operated within the framework of patriarchal norms and generated numerous gender stereotypes. Moreover, older working women articulated that the challenges faced in the workplace and societal and familial expectations frequently oppose their professional drives. Consequently, the author posits that older women can be valuable contributors to the workplace; however, an inclusive environment is essential to inspire their engagement.

Keywords: Ageing Experience, Ageing and Work, Gerontology of Older Women.

Introduction

The increasing global ageing population increased focus on the ageing experiences of older women (Ahmad, 2023; Hussain, 2021); however, in Pakistan, these issues are significantly underexplored. The ageing population in Pakistan is also increasing, with a notable feminization of ageing, as women tend to outlive men, rendering older women a significant demographic group. Nonetheless, their contributions and challenges remain inadequate in research and policy discourse (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Older women encounter systemic barriers, such as mandatory retirement at age 60 and insufficient post-retirement support, which intensify their economic and social vulnerabilities (Bockerman & Ilmakunnas, 2021). The ageing experiences of women differ markedly from those of men, influenced by societal expectations regarding female ageing and the dual responsibilities of family and work (Henkens et al., 2020).

The participation of women in the workforce is influenced by traditional gender roles and cultural expectations, which frequently restrict them to designated societal responsibilities (Settersten & Godlewski, 2021). Older women experience compounded influences from societal attitudes toward ageing, which intersect with their lifelong caregiving and family obligations (Allen et al., 2021). For older women, work engagement is a source of financial stability and plays a significant

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role in enhancing psychological well-being, shaping personal identity, and fostering social inclusion. Employment offers older women a sense of purpose, individuality, and agency and improves their quality of life (Schaufeli et al., 2021). Nonetheless, societal biases and insufficient systemic support frequently restrict their access to substantial employment opportunities. Age and gender stereotypes exacerbate the marginalization of older women, compelling many to depend on familial support and intensifying their social and economic difficulties (Cohen-Mansfield et al., 2022).

Research indicates that comprehending older women's work and ageing experiences is crucial for addressing the intersectionality of gender, ageing, and socioeconomic barriers (Hannan et al., 2023). To add to an existing body of literature regarding ageing experiences, the present study aims to investigate the ageing experiences of older working women. It is assumed that the study will contribute to the existing literature on post-retirement work and the ageing experiences in Pakistan. The authors of the study argue that acknowledging the distinct needs and contributions of women fosters the development of inclusive policies that enhance their participation in the workforce and society at large, thus reducing the marginalization and dependency of older women on family support in addressing social and economic challenges (Ahmad, 2023; WHO, 2022).

Review of the Literature

The convergence of ageing and working experiences among older women has emerged as a progressively studied subject worldwide. Women over 55 encounter distinct obstacles and motives influenced by socioeconomic and cultural issues. The economic imperative is a primary motivator for the ongoing workforce engagement of older women. Many women encounter financial instability in later life due to reduced lifetime wages, restricted access to pensions, and extended caregiving obligations (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011; Ni Léime & Street, 2017). The "feminization of poverty" issue underscores the cumulative disadvantages encountered by older women, especially those who are widowed or alone, frequently lacking sufficient financial support (Minkler & Stone, 1985).

The feminization of poverty signifies the rising percentage of women, especially older women, within the global impoverished demographic. This phenomenon is influenced by gendered income disparities, caregiving obligations, and systemic disadvantages that disproportionately affect women in later life. Research highlights the convergence of gender, age, and ethnicity in sustaining poverty. Minority women in the United States experience elevated poverty rates in old age as a result of institutional racism and restricted access to decent employment during their working years (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). Older women in poverty frequently encounter exacerbated difficulties, such as restricted access to healthcare and social marginalization. These factors intensify poverty and reliance (Victor, 2005; WHO, 2011).

Research from developed nations indicates that financial independence encourages older women to prolong their careers, enhancing economic stability and diminishing reliance on governmental or familial assistance (Leonesio et al., 2012). Employment offers older women essential social and psychological advantages, such as identity, purpose, and social interaction. Employment mitigates isolation and enhances mental well-being by regulating daily routines and facilitating intergenerational relationships (Dittmann-Kohli & Jopp, 2007; Fiedeler, 2014). Ongoing employment offers older women a financial resource, diminishing dependence on familial assistance or inadequate pensions (Hooyman & Kiyak, 2011).

This financial stability mitigates the "feminization of poverty," especially for widowed or single women (Minkler & Stone, 1985). Employment enables women to address escalating healthcare

expenses and expand insufficient retirement savings, particularly in environments with restricted social security (Leonesio et al., 2012; Zhang et al., 2017). Employment offers older women a feeling of purpose and identity, aiding in preserving self-esteem and personal fulfilment. Numerous individuals find fulfilment in coaching junior colleagues and engaging in significant tasks (Dittmann-Kohli & Jopp, 2007). Employment sustains cognitive function by stimulating the brain through problem-solving, decision-making, and ongoing learning (Fiedeler, 2014; Newton et al., 2018). Employment promotes social engagement and mitigates the isolation frequently linked to retirement. Older women gain advantages from professional networks and community engagement, enhancing their emotional and psychological well-being (Jahoda, 1981; Stiglbauer & Batinic, 2012).

Employment enables older women to engage with younger generations, facilitating information transfer and establishing mentorship connections (Mor-Barak, 1995). Employment promotes physical activity among older women, especially in positions requiring movement or adherence to structured routines. This enhances physical health and endurance (Paul & Batinic, 2009). A consistent work schedule enhances physical and emotional well-being, offering a framework corresponding to healthy ageing practices (Newton et al., 2018). Employment enables older women to reconfigure their identities beyond conventional caregiving, expanding their autonomy and societal worth (Herbert, 2023). Employment offers an alternate identity to motherhood or caregiving, making women feel esteemed and proficient in professional roles (Walsh et al., 2020). Ongoing employment safeguards against unanticipated financial difficulties, including unexpected medical costs or caring duties for grandchildren or spouses (Leonesio et al., 2012). Employment cultivates resilience, aiding older women in adjusting to life transitions such as spousal loss or empty nest syndrome (Narushima & Kawabata, 2020). Herbert's (2023) research indicates that rural older women in Ireland regard labour as a means of autonomy, identity, and communal involvement, albeit with minimal financial rewards. Newton et al. (2018) and Paul and Batinic (2009) demonstrate a positive correlation between work and physical and mental health outcomes. Cultural norms profoundly influence the experiences of older women in the workforce. In South Asian countries, particularly Pakistan, women's roles are frequently restricted to caring and household responsibilities, constraining their visibility and chances in professional spheres (Kikkawa & Gaspar, 2022). These obstacles are exacerbated by ageism and gender preconceptions, leading to older women being viewed as less capable or helpful contributors (Sontag, 1972; North & Fiske, 2015).

Methodology

Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of older working women in Punjab, Pakistan. IPA is particularly suited for understanding subjective human experiences, as it delves into personal narratives to uncover nuanced perspectives. This methodology is rooted in the philosophical traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics, emphasizing the interpretation of participants' perspectives within their cultural and social contexts. IPA was chosen to capture how older women make sense of their ageing experiences while highlighting their meaning-making processes. The approach enables a detailed exploration of their challenges, role transitions, and strategies for maintaining work-life balance, offering insights that quantitative methods cannot provide. The study aims to connect individual narratives to broader social phenomena, emphasizing the interplay between gender, age, and work within a patriarchal and evolving societal structure. IPA

guides the design, prioritizing in-depth narratives to reveal the complexities of older women's experiences. The design emphasizes iterative processes where themes are derived inductively from data. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection tool, enabling open-ended discussions around ageing, work-life balance, and societal challenges. This design focused on capturing rich, detailed accounts rather than generalizable patterns. By selecting a qualitative approach, the researcher sought to explore the socio-cultural and personal factors influencing older women's motivations and challenges in formal work settings, providing policy-relevant insights into this emerging area of inquiry in Pakistan.

Population and Universe

The universe of this study encompasses older working women in Punjab, Pakistan. Punjab, the most populous province, was chosen for its socio-cultural diversity and substantial urban population, where older women are more likely to engage in formal work. The research focuses on three major cities, Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Multan, representing Central, North, and South Punjab. These cities were selected due to their prominent educational and employment opportunities, which correlate with higher participation of older women in formal jobs. The urban context of these cities allowed the researcher to access a diverse population of older women actively navigating ageing and work challenges.

Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select participants based on their relevance to the study's objectives. Older women aged 60 and above with formal employment experiences were targeted to ensure insights into post-retirement work. The sampling aimed for diversity in socioeconomic status, education, and professional backgrounds, reflecting the multifaceted experiences of older women in Punjab. Participants were recruited through personal networks and colleagues, emphasizing information-rich cases. The purposive sampling approach facilitated the inclusion of women from varied sectors, including education, health, administration, and media, ensuring the representation of distinct perspectives.

Sample Size

The final sample comprised 24 participants, selected based on data saturation. Saturation was reached when no new themes emerged during data collection. The sample was distributed across the three cities, with 9 participants from Lahore, 8 from Rawalpindi, and 7 from Multan. This distribution ensured regional representation while allowing for an in-depth exploration of aging experiences. The relatively small sample size aligns with qualitative research norms, prioritizing depth over breadth to capture detailed narratives and identify common themes among participants.

Tool of Data Collection

Semi-structured interview guide was the primary data collection tool, complemented by systematic observations. The interview guide covered diverse themes, including career trajectories, ageing perceptions, work motivations, and societal challenges. Questions were open-ended to encourage participants to share detailed accounts. Observations of participants' non-verbal cues, such as tone and body language, enriched the data. Interviews were conducted in Urdu to ensure participants' comfort, recorded with consent, and transcribed for analysis. This approach enabled the researcher to delve deeply into participants' lived experiences while maintaining flexibility to adapt questions based on responses.

Analysis Techniques

The study utilized IPA for data analysis, focusing on idiographic and interpretive exploration of individual experiences before identifying shared themes. The process began with familiarization, where interview transcripts were read and re-read alongside field notes. Exploratory notes captured linguistic and conceptual elements, including metaphors and emotional expressions. Themes were then developed iteratively, linking participants' narratives to broader theoretical constructs. A cross-case analysis followed, identifying patterns and divergences across participants' accounts. The final thematic structure comprised three overarching themes, supported by participant quotes, ensuring authenticity and depth in the findings.

Findings

The findings indicated a diverse experience of older working women in Punjab, Pakistan, emphasizing the challenges and resilience these women demonstrate as they navigate the intersection of age and work. Through qualitative narratives, it captures themes of identity, social and cultural dynamics and challenges of ageing and work for the older women.

Work as Identity and Fulfillment

For the majority of participants, employment transcended mere financial necessity, functioning as a source of identity and purpose (Antai et al., 2023; Jahoda, 2022; Principi et al., 2018). A retired teacher remarked, "I am reluctant to retire as my profession defines my identity. It maintains my activity and engagement." Likewise, others indicated that employment offered autonomy, social interaction, and cognitive engagement (Loretto et al., 2020). A majority of the participants characterized their work accomplishments as essential to their personal identity. For instance, a retired professor remarked, "My students still seek out to me for help, and that reminds me of the impact I've had on their lives. It is not merely a profession; it is my legacy." This assertion illustrates how employment offers a sustained sense of purpose and significance even post-retirement (Cambridge Core, 2023; Jahoda, 1981).

Another participant, a healthcare worker, stated, "when individuals address me as 'doctor,' it exceeds mere nomenclature—it defines my identity. I exerted some effort to obtain it, and it sustains my motivation." Such emotions emphasize that employment bolsters their self-esteem, providing affirmation in a society that frequently associates ageing with diminished worth (Smeaton et al., 2018). For numerous women, employment offers essential avenues for social connection and involvement. This is particularly significant in later life when social circles may diminish due to the death of peers or decreased family engagement. A participant working in education commented;

The staffroom is my second home. My colleagues and pupils revitalize me and provide motivation to rise each morning. Employment is a tool to overcome loneliness. After my children moved abroad, my office became my family. It is the place where I feel acknowledged and valued.

These accounts underscore the significance of employment in cultivating community and alleviating the loneliness frequently associated with ageing (Jahoda, 2022; Pino, 2020). Employment functions as a mechanism for cognitive engagement and the preservation of autonomy. A participant expressed "I anticipate addressing challenges at my job. It maintains my mental acuity and instills a sense of competence." For these women, professional positions provide a framework that sustains their mental engagement and confidence (Loretto et al., 2020; Camfield & Warden, 2021). Autonomy surfaced as a prominent theme, with respondents enjoying the financial and personal independence through workplace. A widow employed in administration

stated, “I do not wish to rely on anyone, neither my children nor any other individuals.” My occupation represents my liberation. This phrase reflects the empowerment women gain from exercising control over their lives and decisions via sustained employment. They regarded their professional lives as essential to their self-esteem and emotional health. One participant articulated, “Retirement is not suitable for me. I aspire to continue contributing, evolving, and experiencing vitality through my work.” It means that retirement is also a subjective feeling as many women were not subjectively ready to give up their formal duties (Cambridge Core, 2023; Smeaton et al., 2018).

Socio-Cultural Dynamics

Participants underlined how their job careers were shaped by social standards. Often governed by patriarchal norms, many women had to balance career aspirations with family responsibilities. One participant reported, “after marriage, my in-laws pressured me to quit my teaching job to focus on family responsibilities.” This captures often women's career advancement is hampered by family demands. One of the main hurdles influencing the job experience of older women in South Asian countries is patriarchal family system. Many participants underlined how conventional gender norms defined their personal and professional life (Kabeer, 2023; Pande et al., 2022). One participant said, “I had to run the house and bring my kids up while working. It was expected of me; compromise had no place here.” Another participant reported, “my husband's family was doubtful when I first start working. They thought a woman belongs in the house; hence it needed years of evidence to convince them of anything else.” These findings highlight the dual burden many women carry between domestic chores and caring for work obligations. The capacity of elderly women to work depended much on family relationships. While some participants said they encountered opposition from partners or in-laws, others applauded their families for supporting their career endeavors (Datta & Mishra, 2023). One of the teachers reported that “my father insisted to finish my degree which let me pursue teaching. I wouldn't have followed the career I enjoy now without his help.” That kind of support, though, was not widespread. Many women suffered social pressure to give up their professions upon marriage or delivery. One participant related, “my mother-in-law encouraged me to quit working when my kid was born, stating it was my job to focus on the family. I had to struggle to maintain my employment.” This shows how often cultural norms force women to give family responsibilities top priority over career goals.

Women's experiences were additionally complex cultural ideas of gender and ageing. Older women often ran upon preconceptions that devalued their professional value. One participant said, “people think you get less capable as you get older. Constantly proving that experience is a benefit rather than a liability. Such thinking irritates me.” Another healthcare-related participant observed, “younger colleagues sometimes ignore my ideas because they see me as old-fashioned. Though it hurts, I have learned to stand up for myself.” Such stories highlight how ageism interacts with gender inequality to provide particular difficulties for working older women (Kumar, 2024). For many women, keeping on working was a statement of rebellion against limited cultural expectations. Retired civil servant said, “working gave me a voice in my family. It made me financially independent and won respect from my kids and neighbors.” These women redefining their roles in their families, communities and challenged social expectations by using their professional success. Participants' employment decisions and motivations also changed with respect to religious and cultural beliefs. Islamic ideas of stressing the value of education and social contribution inspired some women (Sinha & Roy, 2023). One woman said, “Islam inspires women to pursue knowledge and helpfully contribute.” One means of meeting that commitment is through

employment. On the other hand, the majority of the women reported cultural identification affected their feeling of purpose; professional responsibilities helped them to sustain traditional values while interacting with contemporary social needs (Ali, 2022).

Challenges of Ageing

Ageism has shown as a persistent impairment. Older women often face preconceptions that challenge their competence and adaptability. A participant stated, “I was disregarded for a leadership position due to the assumption that I was too old to tackle new challenges.” Gender biases worsened these issues, as women faced more severe scrutiny than males on ageing in the workplace (Parker et al., 2019; Cuddy et al., 2021). Ageism is one of the most pervasive obstacles for older women, since participants commonly encountered preconceptions that associated ageing with lower productivity and adaptability. A participant stated, “my manager suggested that younger employees are more adapting at contemporary tasks, despite my extensive experience and established record of success.” Another participant remarked, “in meetings, I occasionally feel disregarded as my ideas are perceived as obsolete.” It is an ongoing challenge to ensure my voice is acknowledged. These experiences illustrate how cultural prejudices on ageing manifest in professional settings, marginalizing older employees (Binns & Karakowsky, 2020; Grob et al., 2022).

Older women frequently encounter distinct scrutiny stemming from the convergence of age and gender. Unlike their male colleagues, who may benefit from ideas of increased knowledge with age, women are generally appraised on their beauty and perceived energy levels. A participant stated, “society anticipates women to appear youthful and vigorous, and when we do not, they presume we lack competence.” This double standard results in increased difficulties in preserving professional credibility and self-esteem. It also imposes greater pressure to adhere to societal standards, which is less evident for older males in comparable positions (Kaufmann et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2023).

Ageing naturally results in physical and health-related issues that might influence professional effectiveness. Numerous participants reported managing chronic diseases, including arthritis, visual impairments, and fatigue, which impede their capacity to work extended hours. A teacher stated, “enduring prolonged hours in the classroom has become challenging, yet I continue due to my passion for the profession.” The absence of workplace adjustments for older employees intensifies these challenges for many. Flexible hours, ergonomic equipment, and health benefits were frequently inaccessible, compelling women to either overexert themselves or exit their positions prematurely (Lee & Patel, 2019; McGowan, 2021).

Older women indicated being disregarded for promotions and leadership roles owing to misconceptions regarding their capacity to navigate contemporary issues. A participant stated, “they did not consider me for a managerial position, claiming they required someone with innovative ideas. It seemed like my experience didn’t matter.” The absence of upward mobility discourages numerous women from seeking long-term career aspirations, constraining their professional advancement and financial stability in subsequent years (Miller & Morrow, 2020; Krings et al., 2022). The swift progression of technical innovations presents an extra challenge for older women. Some participants actively sought training to remain current, while others encountered opposition from companies reluctant to invest in their skill enhancement. A participant stated, “I enrolled in a course on digital tools to remain current, yet I still struggle to adapt as swiftly as my younger colleagues.” The absence of institutional assistance for older

workers in acquiring new technology frequently leads to feelings of inadequacy and alienation (Schaie, 2022; Marshall et al., 2023).

Many older women remain in the labor due to financial necessity, but they often find themselves in hazardous or low-paying professions. An administrative participant remarked, "I intended to retire, but due to escalating expenses and the absence of a suitable pension, I was compelled to continue working." Regrettably, the existing solutions lack stability and adequate compensation. The lack of strong pension systems or financial safety nets compels numerous older women to remain employed under adverse conditions for sustaining economic uncertainty (Pratt et al., 2021; Campbell & Stone, 2024). The aggregate impact of these obstacles frequently adversely affects the mental and emotional well-being of older women. A participant stated, "it is exhausting to perpetually validate your worth. It feels as though the world is progressing too rapidly for you." Emotions of alienation, self-doubt, and stress arising from workplace dynamics and societal demands impose a significant emotional load. Notwithstanding their resilience, some women indicated feelings of undervaluation, isolation, or coercion to exit the workforce early (Edwards & Aguiar, 2022; Pranvera et al., 2023).

Alongside job hurdles, cultural and familial expectations frequently clash with the professional ambitions of older women. Numerous individuals articulated the compulsion to prioritize caregiving responsibilities over professional progress. A participant stated, "despite my age, my family anticipates that I will care for the grandchildren while employed. It seems I am perpetually unable to concentrate exclusively on my profession." The combined duties impose considerable stress and restrict the time and energy women may allocate to their professional activities, so impeding their success (Wilson et al., 2020; Arber & Ginn, 2022).

Conclusion

Aged population is increasing not in Pakistan but around the world. Older people after retirement depend on other for fulfilling their socio-economic needs. However, their post-retirement work experiences are less visible in existing body of literature and the current study using qualitative research methodology explored ageing and working experiences among older women from Lahore, Multan and Rawalpindi. Three themes i.e., work as identity, socio-cultural dynamics and challenges of ageing emerged from data collected through in-depth interviews of the older working women. Post-retirement working was not only beneficial for financial autonomy but it also kept women active in civic participation. However, such women were facing many socio-cultural challenges. They were working under patriarchal norms and faced many gender stereotypes. Besides, older working women also expressed that workplace challenges, societal and familial expectations often conflict with older women's professional aspirations. Therefore, the author suggest that older women may be productive part of the workplace but inclusive environment is the need of time to motive them.

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