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# Navigating Respectability in Patriarchal Contexts: Ethical Dilemmas of Women Researchers in Pakistan

Sarah Holz, Abida Bano

## Abstract

The article explores the field research experiences of two women researchers who navigated patriarchal social dynamics in Pakistan. We use respectability as a lens to explain how we established ourselves in our research contexts and how we negotiated our positions. Drawing on extensive fieldwork for our PhD studies, we show the moral conundrums of constantly moving on a spectrum of being both a “respectable” woman and a “woman researcher”. We had to navigate both identities carefully to access research respondents and build rapport. This meant at times adhering to patriarchal gender norms, while in other situations, willingly or unwillingly, transgressing them. We show that we had to constantly mediate between professional goals, personal and social norms and values, and our own wellbeing. We thereby seek to contribute to discussions on the vulnerability of researchers and the ethics of care.

**Keywords:** Research ethics, fieldwork, gender, patriarchy, feminism, ethics of care, Pakistan

## Introduction

When conducting social research, we, as researchers, often encounter unexpected and unplanned situations that cause some form of unease. We have to react to these situations instantaneously, and such responses might significantly impact rapport with respondents and our interactions in research settings. By “unexpected and unplanned situations”, we are referring to occasions when we have to mediate between professional standards and goals, our own emotions and personal norms and levels of comfort, and prevailing social norms and conventions. These occur despite careful planning and the associated identity management and modulation of conduct this entails. We consider such situations critical events that create research ethical dilemmas. Often, we immediately feel that something is not right; in the moment, however, there is little room for pondering. The significance of such critical events might only become apparent

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in hindsight as we continue to think about them, and as we start discussing them with colleagues, questioning our choices, wondering whether we should have acted differently, whether we should have been more critical, spoken up or toned down our reactions. Due to the uncertainty such events create, with potentially direct bearing on researchers' safety and security, and because they are very difficult to prepare for, we consider them to be factors that create volatility in field work.

Here, we focus specifically on instances where we had to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable situations in patriarchal settings in Pakistan. These unplanned and highly complex encounters placed us in situations that pushed the boundaries of our own and our respondents' cultural appropriateness and ideas about ourselves and themselves in society. None of these interactions were outright violent or hostile; nevertheless, they not only caused us discomfort in the moment but have remained on our minds. Agata Lisiak rightly observes that "incidents and encounters in the field can leave a researcher deeply moved, confused, angry, even shattered" (Lisiak 2015: 30). A number of other scholars have also encountered situations that left them feeling uneasy during fieldwork (cf. Gallaher 2009, Kloß 2017, Radsch 2019, Johansson 2015, Trigger et al. 2012). Because of their subtlety, uncomfortable situations are sometimes overlooked in debates about research ethics, even though their reverberations for our data collection and analysis processes and for us personally are significant (Brown 2009, Davies 2010, Johnstone 2019, Tomiak 2019).

These encounters can be subtle and confusing, which makes it difficult to articulate clearly why they make us feel uncomfortable; hence, this is an important topic to consider in debates about research ethics and researchers' vulnerability. In the current neo-liberal and male-dominated academic environment there is little room to reflect on these interactions, especially from a gendered perspective. In conversations and public debates such situations are often trivialised as the personal issue of an individual researcher who "failed" to "endure" what is required for fieldwork (Kloß 2017: 397f.). In this way any further discussion is silenced. This male-centric and neo-liberal research environment has been rightly criticised (cf. Günel et al. 2020, Corbera et al. 2020, Hussain 2020, Nagar 2014, Talwar Oldenburg 1990, Ross, 2015).

This article presents our shared reflections on encounters that created moral and ethical conundrums for us, as women with particular positionalities who conduct research in Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> We explain how we navigated uncomfortable situations in the field and "bargained" within patriarchal constraints, and we offer systematic reflections on these incidents. We foreground patriarchy as a significant and transversal factor in our research and use the notion of respecta-

1 Several markers of identity (e.g. ethnicity, class, skin colour, religion, age) intersect with gender and thus determine how we experience the world; therefore we can only speak from our respective positionalities (see Banerjee / Ghosh 2018, Crenshaw 2017).

bility to explain why we reacted in certain ways. We thus highlight patriarchy, and consequently gender, as significant factors to take into consideration in research ethics, because in patriarchal contexts the establishment of non-hierarchical relationships between researchers and respondents, often seen as a gold standard for ethical research, is impossible (Knowles 2006, Pereira 2019, Sohl 2018).

While our reactions to these particular situations were spontaneous and did not follow a specific strategy, by consciously reflecting on them and comparing notes with others, we were able to learn from each situation, and when we encountered similar situations at later points in time, we were, to some extent, able to modulate our behaviour and, consequently, felt better prepared (Berik 1996). By systematically scrutinising some of these instances, we seek to normalise discussions about incidents that leave us conflicted (Kloß 2017, Vithal 2012) and to move away from male-centric criteria of “good” research in the “field”. We consider the discomfort that stems from these unplanned encounters and the subsequent reflections as indicators of ethical challenges and as productive instances of learning that require us to reflect on our privilege, helping us to better understand the context in which we live and work (Fujii 2014, Hoffman 2021, Klutz et al. 2020).

The identification, documentation and reporting of context-specific dilemmas and “what can be done with them” (Vithal 2012: 20) helps to re-code such disruptions and uncomfortable situations as ethical challenges that are part of most research experiences, since patriarchy is a structure that permeates almost all societies. In this way, such situations are no longer anomalies in “exotic” contexts that lower the quality of the collected data. Such locally grounded accounts create room for discussion and contribute to de-centring research methodologies and knowledge production.<sup>2</sup> We have found reflexive and collaborative accounts to be very helpful in bringing out complexity (Cerwonka / Malki 2007, Bröckerhoff / Kipnis 2014). This is why we have adopted a similar approach to compare our experiences.

A number of articles focus on the specific experiences and ethical challenges women researchers might encounter in the Global South<sup>3</sup> and in volatile settings.<sup>4</sup> Only a few authors systematically connect their research experiences to patriarchy.<sup>5</sup> As two political scientists who utilise qualitative research methods and immersion, we are interested in institutions, albeit quite different ones, and we both mainly interacted with people who are “literate, articulate, self-conscious and with the power, resources, and expertise to control information and protect

2 Cf. Denzin et al. 2008, Chilisa 2012, Mignolo 2018, Smith 2012.

3 Cf. Asif 2010, Berik 1996, Godbole 2014, Halai / William 2012, Johnstone 2019, Kloß 2017, Lunn 2014, Pardhan 2012, Radsch 2009, Schwedler 2006, Shamim / Qureshi 2010, Srivastava 2006, Vithal 2012.

4 Cf. contributions in Nordstrom / Robben 1995, Sriram et al. 2009.

5 Cf. Charania 2021, Dossa 2021, Jabeen 2013, Khalid 2014.

their reputation” (Jabeen 2013: 220) and could thus be part of an elite. While our positionalities were quite different in some respects, we both occupied privileged positions – we are both highly educated/academically trained, Abida Bano being raised in a respected/influential family and working at a renowned regional university in Pakistan, and Sarah Holz being a Western, white woman holding a position at a German university. When we discussed our experiences, we found that we shared many remarkably similar concerns due to our gender identity.

Women are not a homogeneous group; class, cultural capital, socio-economic status, ethnicity, religion, age and skin colour create multiple intersectional concerns. Our observations and discussions with colleagues showed that no matter to what extent markers of identity differed, many of our experiences were structured by patriarchy and thereby remarkably similar. Moreover, many of the research ethical dilemmas we came across were quite similar due to prevailing patriarchal norms. By this we mean asymmetrical power relations between women and men where men dominate norm-setting and decision-making which creates gender- and age-based inequalities. These patriarchal norms and structures determine individual and collective conduct significantly. While patriarchy exists in countries around the world, in Pakistan, we find its disciplinary power very intense. In hindsight, while planning our research trips, neither of us reflected much on how our identity as women would impact our practice and what kinds of emotions it would create because we were focused on our professional interests. Patriarchy only emerged gradually as a significant factor in our research through the accumulation of experiences and exchanges with colleagues and friends.

Hence, for us, patriarchal structures cut across class, religion and skin colour and affect every single person’s professional and personal lives (Banerjee / Ghosh 2018, Toor 2007). While male scholars also have to adhere to the patriarchal transcript, their experiences and ethical challenges look quite different.<sup>6</sup> We noticed that many male colleagues hardly mention gender in their reflections beyond the pro forma nod to the difficulties that gender segregation creates. In contrast, many female colleagues are very conscious of their gender identity, such as Wajeeha Tahir (forthcoming 2023), who enquired how Pakistani students negotiate their identity, and produced similar findings. While many male students hardly mentioned gender as an important part of their identity because they saw it as a given, among women, gender identity was a topic that emerged much more strongly than initially expected.

We link the need to be constantly mindful of our gendered bodies, and the attached expectations, to volatility. In Pakistan, not only do we consider volatility in terms of political instability and the risk of extremist violence, but we

6 We believe that patriarchy affects women and men alike. However, there are only a few male researchers who engage with this topic (e.g. Khan 2021, Galam 2015, Rahat Shah in Batool et al. 2021).

also see patriarchy as a structural factor that renders a context volatile and thus requires attention in terms of research ethical considerations. First, the power asymmetries that characterise patriarchal settings control our behaviour. Our room for action is constantly shifting, depending on the patronage and favours that are extended to us by dominant groups or individuals. Second, patriarchal norms and expectations are often contradictory because the boundaries between “good” and “respectable” v. “bad” and “disreputable” are ambiguous and fuzzy. This creates uncertainty and volatility and places particularly women and those considered as non-male in vulnerable positions, because it is not always clear when a red line is crossed.

Especially in the past few decades, women’s rights have been a fiercely contested issue in Pakistan, as shown by recent debates about the Aurat March (Women’s Day Marches) or contestations regarding drafts of domestic violence bills (Dossa 2021, Charania 2021, Tanwir et al. 2019). Women’s movements have become increasingly articulate and present in the public sphere, a situation that some sections of society view as a form of Westernisation and moral breakdown. Due to globalisation (including migration, shifts in the labour market and exchanges of ideas), rising levels of education and mobility, the dominant social norms and conventions are contested in Pakistan. This means that boundaries of social conduct are porous and constantly shifting, making it possible to overstep boundaries quickly. The crossing of social boundaries can go either way and, given the heated climate around the status of women in general, could potentially have far-reaching implications, personal as well as professional, for a researcher. It was this uncertainty that surrounds the patriarchy, and the constant re-negotiation of gender norms, that framed our work, rather than political instability and large-scale conflict.

Whether we wanted to or not, we were unable to remove ourselves from the broader circumstances. We wanted to continue to immerse ourselves in this context, which is why it was important to us to appear “respectable” within the patriarchal framework. Performing respectability was not only important for our professional goals but also for our personal wellbeing and ultimately for our safety and security.

The following section provides a brief overview of our research settings and our positionalities. We then explain how we use respectability as a lens to reflect on our experiences. Thereafter, we discuss how we sought to establish respectability, and in the last section we explain how we navigated uncomfortable situations that arose from our desire to “be respectable”.

## Situating ourselves in the research context

### Abida Bano

I used in-depth individual interviews and participant observation as the main tools of data collection to research women's representation in local democracy in a peripheral province of Pakistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). I gathered data from three districts: the urbanised parts of Peshawar district, the suburban Mardan area and the rural Swat district.<sup>7</sup> The three districts are predominantly ethnic Pashtun areas where most people adhere to patriarchal notions of gender seclusion and segregation, and they practise *Pashtunwali*, a codified aspect of Pashtun culture that may fit the definition of informal institutions established by Helmke and Levitsky (2006). Between 2015 and 2016, over a period of around seven months, I often travelled to more than 12 union councils (rural and semi-urban) in the chosen areas to perform in-depth interviews with elected men and women local councillors. I did 63 in-depth interviews and took copious field notes. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes; however, they sometimes went longer. The interviews took place at the respondents' preferred locations.

Pashtun society is primarily rural in character. Peshawar still exhibits more rural characteristics than urban ones, even though other provincial capitals, such as Karachi and Lahore, are heavily industrialised and modernised. The cultural expectations and norms of rural Pashtun culture dominated the contexts in which I performed my research.

At the field site, I positioned myself as a native, educated and respectable working woman, familiar with the rural and urban milieu of KP. I could be considered respectable because I come from a "good" family. My clan was elevated above others in the Pashtun social structure in the rural setting due to their reputable ancestry and landholding. In urban environments, my family's respectability stemmed from highly educated family members employed in the government and our stable socio-economic standing. My position at the university also enhances my respectability, since teaching is seen as a respectable and desired occupation for women in Pakistani society. Even though I was reared outside my native village, my family and I frequently visited our family members who lived in rural KP, which kept me informed about rural social contexts. In agrarian patrilineal Pashtun society, family lineage and ancestry are still relevant and vital categories for identifying an individual. As opposed to individual identities, people are known and addressed according to their families. Furthermore, those who maintain links with their village and culture

7 The rural-urban divide comes from the government's demarcation of urban and rural areas for the purpose of Local Government elections in KP.



are considered “solid and respectable” in popular rural discourses. My family kept in touch with our ancestral roots, to maintain privilege in the rural social structure. Furthermore, I had a thorough understanding of the language, cultural norms, subtleties of intercultural communication, respect/honour gestures and humour. I was confident of the expectations and norms I had to adhere to while visiting rural areas, since I had strong connections with the society and shared its culture. Hence, I considered myself an “insider”.<sup>8</sup>

However, some people thought I was an “outsider” and they were very vocal about it while I was conducting my research. Depending on who was looking, my status as an educated, comparatively independent woman, living in a city, and having a job as a university professor may have made me seem like an “outsider” (Crean 2018, Wolf 1996). Managing the emotional impact of the ambiguity in identification (both “insider” and “outsider”), as well as its implications for my research, was a continual struggle during my fieldwork.

I pursued my PhD studies at a US university. One of the prerequisites for a PhD research project’s acceptance is to submit the study plan to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) – HSIRB<sup>9</sup> of the university before formally commencing fieldwork. Obtaining IRB permission is a laborious, protracted procedure that might take months. Researchers have to complete extensive documentation and take an accredited training course (CITI). The board’s clearance procedure mandates that the study take measures to guarantee the rights and wellbeing of the respondents, focusing on the safety and protection of participants during the research. The IRB permission letter serves as a guide, advising researchers to rigorously adhere to study guidelines in order to keep themselves and others safe while doing fieldwork. While the procedures in the document are helpful, their applicability in all contexts is not always a given.

I carefully planned my fieldwork approach after getting clearance from the HSIRB. Some of these precautions included dressing appropriately (*shalwar kameez*, *chaddar* – a loose cloth to cover the body from head to knee – and face veil), abstaining from speaking in English or even Urdu and having a male escort the entire time – preferably a relative (Sultana 2007). I always took these safety steps to ensure a successful fieldwork experience and I tried to follow established cultural norms to navigate the complex cultural waters present in patriarchal and conservative settings (Asif 2010).

8 See Crean 2018, Dam / Lunn 2014, Godbole 2014, Owais 2021, Sultana 2007.

9 Human Subjects Institutional Review Boards (HSIRB) are a regular feature in US graduate programmes. Every student wanting to do fieldwork has to go through the arduous and lengthy process to secure approval for her/his project beforehand. The process is about ensuring that studies adhere to procedural standards of research ethics and safeguarding the rights of the research respondents. Apart from the formal approval, attending certified training courses that are part of the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program) is another requirement.



## Sarah Holz

I conducted interviews and observations for my PhD project in exclusively urban settings, mainly in Islamabad, over a period of nine months from March 2013 to September 2016. I wanted to understand the institutional history and sphere of influence of the Council of Islamic Ideology, an advisory body made up of lawyers, judges, *ulama* (religious scholars), scholars and technical experts who advise Pakistan's executive and legislative bodies on the conformity of laws with Islamic principles (Holz 2023).

Federal government agencies, embassies and head offices of international development organisations are located within a small radius in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan.<sup>10</sup> I moved primarily in this area and in these spaces, where government officials, shopkeepers and other service providers are used to seeing and interacting with foreigners, at least on a superficial level. Hence, the offices and institutions I primarily spent my time in were more heterogeneous than the rural or semi-rural contexts Abida Bano moved in. A woman moving around alone in this part of Islamabad, even though still not that common, was not unheard of.

Almost all of my respondents were men, and the government and educational institutions I visited most often were male dominated. I also interacted with persons in the development and civil society sector, private enterprises and public universities, where more women were present in the workplace. Interviews and interactions mainly took place in offices and official settings; only a few interviews occurred in cafes or private homes.

I am German, and before my PhD studies I had worked in Pakistan and was, to a certain extent, familiar with the political situation and (urban) social customs and had a working knowledge of Urdu. My status as an educated, white, female, non-Muslim foreigner meant that I enjoyed certain privileges that allowed me to sidestep constraints that Pakistani women researchers might face. As a result of colonialism and the donor economy, white foreigners are treated with much respect and greeted with open doors because they are associated with "success, modernity and wealth" (Bonnett / Nayak 2003: 309) and hence higher social class positions. Falcón (2016) calls the benefits and entitlements that come with a Global North nationality "imperial privilege", which is even further enhanced by white skin colour. Like other white women scholars, I definitely enjoyed the advantages associated with this imperial privilege. At the same time, I had to contend with prevailing prejudices against "the West" in general and white Western women in particular (Schwedler 2006, Radsch 2009, Cilliers et al. 2015, Faria / Mollet 2016 ). For instance, the assumption that I was arrogant, ignorant about the culture and "easy". I believe that foreign

10 This includes the so-called Red Zone, which includes the Diplomatic Enclave where many embassies and donor organisations are located, as well as sectors G-6, F-6, F-7, F-8 and E-7.

researchers of colour and those not read as Christian would have had quite different experiences.<sup>11</sup>

Due to my “young” age and status as an unmarried woman, I was often put in the position of the unknowing student. At times, this was beneficial because it allowed me to ask questions that might have otherwise been dismissed as too trivial. On the other hand, respondents often did not take my questions seriously, or I was quickly interrupted and expected to listen without questioning. My experiences were quite similar to those of Abida Bano and others.<sup>12</sup> Hence, apart from gender, also my skin colour/race and country of origin, which are intricately connected to social class, were important markers of identity that structured my interactions. My ability to speak Urdu and my choice of clothing were central factors in the negotiations of my positionality, a point that I will elaborate later.<sup>13</sup>

For both of us the intersection of gender, class, education, age, language abilities and marital status affected our positionality and power (im)balances during interactions with respondents. We both occupied privileged positions primarily based on our university education and our perceived class identity as “ladies” (*khatun/bibi*); in Abida Bano’s case due to her family background and education abroad, in Sarah Holz’s case due to her education and imperial privilege. Our gender identity and our relatively young age, coupled with being unmarried and PhD students, affected this privilege. Before we elaborate on concrete examples of our experiences, we discuss respectability as our conceptual lens to show that it is central to interactions in patriarchal contexts.

## Patriarchy and respectability

Pakistan’s society is deeply marked by patriarchy and social stratification. We see patriarchal contexts as characterised by structural asymmetrical power gradients between men and women and between young and old. Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) identifies male domination, the preference for male children and restrictive codes of behaviour as characteristic features of patriarchal societies that intersect with capitalism. Suad Joseph (2000) has observed that patriarchal styles of conduct and values are closely interlaced with cultural and kinship bonds (see also Berik 1996, Joseph 1996).

11 See Bouka 2015, Fujii 2014, Lin 2022. I would also include women who are part of Pakistan’s diaspora (Dam / Lunn 2014, Pardhan 2012).

12 Cf. Guerney 1985, Jabeen 2013, Johnstone 2019, Khalid 2014.

13 I limit my discussion to interactions with Pakistani citizens and will not discuss interactions with (white) expats and members of the Pakistani diaspora in Pakistan because the discussion of these experiences would go beyond the scope of this article.

In Pakistan, status and class within the patriarchal system draw on family, marriage, caste (or *biraderi*), religious affiliation and economic situation. The combination of these characteristics determines an individual's freedom to move and act within patriarchal social structures. Additional factors that frame patriarchal social conditions are volatility and uncertainty due to ongoing conflicts, everyday violence, social inequality and widespread debates on Westernisation.

Expectations of appropriate behaviour for men and women and interactions between the genders regulate social interactions. The social pressure to conform is constantly present, even if it varies in scale and degree depending on the context. Women are seen as custodians of honour and respectability (Kandiyoti 1991). Even if men commit transgressions, women are generally held accountable for them or bear the consequences of their male relatives' transgressions (Chaudhary 2014, Naseer 2019, Shah 2016). This is why the respectability of women is under perpetual scrutiny, and women face pressure to be "good" and "respectable" (Ahmad 2010: 5ff). A person's adherence to dominant norms and conventions is often seen as "the external manifestation of his [and her] moral character" where "good character is identified rather closely with conformity to the rules of social propriety" (Nardin 1973: 1).<sup>14</sup> In short, everyone in the society has to embody and perform respectability.

As women political scientists who conduct qualitative research in patriarchal contexts, we had to balance social norms and customs related to patriarchy and respectability with professional goals and the demands we place on our work (Aboulhassan / Brumley 2019). Tension arose because we were crossing established norms of conduct and respectability through our work in the public sphere and our mobility in male-dominated spaces (see also Amirali 2017: 147f). This caused discomfort not only for us but also for the people we interacted with. We were constantly being positioned, judged and discussed. As Stephen Brown (2009) notes, this friendly gossip often arose out of curiosity but was beyond our control and had both positive and negative ramifications. Therefore, we often wondered: Where are we, women researchers, located in this structure? Are we supposed to completely conform and acquiesce to earn respect and ensure our safety? This could entail that we would not be able to do our work as we wish. Or could we simply ignore social boundaries? Was it possible to escape labelling, judging and being watched as women researchers in such contexts? How should we cope with and navigate the clash between our work, our perception of self and social expectations in our research settings? What kind of professional persona did we want to project? Which norms and behaviours would we be ready to push to their limits? Where would we compromise, and

14 While Jane Nardin puts forth this argument to explain the concept of propriety in Jane Austen's novels, the description appears rather fitting in this context.

where would we draw a hard line? In short, how would we bargain with culturally established norms of patriarchy?

Salam Aboulhassan and Krista M. Brumley (2019: 5), referring to Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), described the tension that results from patriarchal bargaining in the following manner: “women submit to specific gender rules that disadvantage them, strategizing to gain social or economic benefits while unknowingly re-creating the system of patriarchy.” The difference in our case was that we were acutely aware of our potential participation in the perpetuation of patriarchal structures, which is where much of our discomfort stemmed from. Out of respect for the people we worked with, to enable data collection and maintain our status and respect, we had to acquiesce to social and patriarchal norms and conventions. Nevertheless, the bargaining impacted how we collected and interpreted data (Chong 2008, Davies 2010, Tomiak 2019). Even though we were also creating instances of subversion through our presence and our actions in male-dominated spaces, the negotiation of divergent and often contradictory expectations, and the making of choices accordingly, did not come easy, and many of the ethical conundrums we faced during our work resulted from this tension.

The paradoxical situations in which we often found ourselves are best illustrated through a story that we were both told numerous times by different respondents. We call it “the diamond story”, and it appears to exist in different versions and with slight variations across South Asia and the Middle East. The story is used as an analogy to state the importance of women in society and the respect that is due to them while simultaneously justifying their seclusion and, by extension, male control. In the story women are compared to diamonds; they are beautiful and highly valued. Because diamonds are precious (*qimati*), they are kept in velvet boxes to protect them from harm.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, women are the treasure (*khazana*) of society and the family; therefore, they need to be protected. Like the velvet box, the best protection is seclusion in the four walls of the house (*char diwaree*), i.e. the practice of *pardah*.

The men who told us this story in different settings seemed to agree with its message, while we wondered how we should respond. Mostly we just smiled, nodded and changed the subject. However, the implication of the story lingered on and triggered a series of questions in our minds. If this was our respondents’ opinion about the place of women in society, what were they thinking of us sitting across from them and exposing ourselves to the public sphere and the male gaze? Were we diamonds outside the box or just rocks in the field? Did they consider us outliers or “other”, and were they telling the story not as a commentary on our actions but rather to convey their own respectability? Whichever meaning it held for the respondents, there was no way to enquire and confirm. Whether intended or not, the telling of the story had an effect on

15 In other versions, women are compared to pearls that need the protection of the oyster shell.

our emotional selves and the research process. Its unsaid implications made us feel that we were being disciplined, because the conclusion that came to mind upon hearing the story was that we were not “respectable” in the respondents’ eyes.

This seemingly innocent story and other similar offhand remarks cast shadows on the prospects of collecting robust data, our research objective and our commitment to decolonise methodologies, as well as on our safety and security. Perhaps respondents would not talk to us about certain subjects because they did not consider such issues fit for the ears of women. We also ask ourselves if respondents did not trust us because we did not match their classic ideal of a diamond. The most profound effect was that the story provoked us to re-think our position and re-strategise our relationship with respondents to achieve our research objectives and to maintain our wellbeing.

The story is just one example that illustrates how we contended with patriarchal constraints in the form of dominant gendered expectations and norms that collided with our own professional zeal and personal convictions throughout our everyday lives and our research process. The moral of the story is that gender relations and segregation, in particular, are strongly regulated in the private and the public sphere and this had a significant impact on how we worked. Unlike others, we found that even though we could push boundaries at times, as researchers we were neither “asexual” nor “ungendered”, nor did we exist outside these patriarchal structures (Kloß 2017: 408).<sup>16</sup> We continued to ask ourselves: “What do our respondents think of us?” More than just perception, this question boiled down to where respondents would position us on the scale of being a “good” and “respectable” woman. These criteria are relational and context dependent. We cared about this question because we were immersed in the context and because it had direct implications for our freedom to move and act and our safety and security, which we discuss in further detail below.

On the one hand, we wanted to be treated with the respect and courtesy that patriarchal norms allocate to women; on the other hand, we wanted to transcend these restrictions and push boundaries. As a result, we were constantly involved in the negotiation of respectability, which is why we find it a useful lens to scrutinise our own actions and reactions. Respectability works differently for men and women and depends on class and context. While all women are expected to act within the limits of female respectability, especially in the public sphere, it is also a class signifier primarily reserved for those women who are considered of privileged background, and hence it applied to us. Due to our positionalities, Sarah Holz as a white foreigner and Abida Bano as a highly educated woman from a “good” family, performing and embodying female respectability became central to our everyday life and work in Pakistan.

16 For instance, Jilian Schwedler (2006) suggests that she was treated like a “third” gender in the Middle East. Many male scholars hardly engage with gendered experiences.

We connect respectability to the notion of *sharafat* (loosely translated as “respectability”) and the related concept of *sharam* (loosely translated as “modesty” or “reserve”).<sup>17</sup> We understand respectability as a marker of social status and moral distinction based on “honourable descent” but one that can also be achieved through performing and embodying social expectations associated with *sharafat* in order to display a “defined character” (Lelyveld 1996: 30), i.e. being *sharif*. In the context of colonial India at the turn of the 20th century, Shenila Khoja-Moolji observes that discussions about *sharafat* were “connected to concerns about women’s mobility [...], knowledges deemed appropriate for women [...], and engagement in paid work [...], which in turn had implications for their status as respectable (*sharif*) subjects” (2018: 23–24). What is considered suitable work and an appropriate career depends on socioeconomic status and class. While low-income and informal work such as domestic labour, tailoring or agricultural work is seen as suitable for women from lower-income households, women from relatively affluent settings pursue teaching and medicine to contribute to the family income. Only in the past decade have white-collar women professionals emerged as a visible group on the labour market. And we were and are part of this group whose position is still under negotiation.<sup>18</sup>

To display respectability, performing and embodying *sharam* is central. *Sharam* can be defined as the ability to control one’s emotions and place one’s body in socially appropriate settings. Being *besharam*, i.e. without modesty, is what people, especially women, want to avoid. Anna Maria Walter, in her work on (pre)marital relationships in Gilgit-Baltistan, a territory in the north of Pakistan, points out that women embody and perform *sharam* in the form of modesty, self-control and reserve in order to claim agency. This means that by adhering to patriarchal social norms, women can carve out room for manoeuvre (Walter 2022: 39–45, 103). For women, performing not only modesty but also respectability is therefore a tool for patriarchal bargaining (Kandiyoti 1988). Being *sharif* and embodying *sharam* are traits that are conferred by others. This means that to be recognised as *sharif*, a person must conduct oneself according to dominant, yet fuzzy and often ambiguous, social and moral standards that are framed by dominant patriarchal, customary and religious discourses.

To substantiate our experiences and what we identified as important features of respectability, we conducted a very small online survey in August 2021 among 23 men and 14 women who were students at Quaid-i-Azam University or the University of Peshawar, i.e., among highly educated individuals. Most respondents said they were from and lived in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, 26 stated

17 So far, there is little systematic conceptualisation and theorising with regard to respectability (Hussein 2017, Khoja-Moolji 2018), though there is much on the related concept of honour (Chaudhary 2014, Naseer 2019, Shah 2016). It is beyond the scope of this paper to theorise respectability in detail.

18 Some scholars have already noted the emergence of a (new) middle class in South Asia, which is also relevant to the position of women professionals; cf. Donner 2008, Fernandes / Heller 2006, Maqsood 2017.



that they had spent most of their lives in a town or city, and 11 stated that they had spent most of their lives in villages and rural contexts. We asked, in Urdu, which traits a woman (*khatun*)<sup>19</sup> or man should display to be considered respectable or worthy of respect (*sharmati / sharmata*). The majority of respondents stated that a respectable woman/lady (*sharmati khatun*) should conform to the conventional cultural norms and should know where the boundaries are. The desirable attributes cited most frequently were honesty, respect, loyalty and support for her family (parents, husband or other close male relatives). About two thirds of the respondents seemed to imply that respect meant accepting the decisions of male relatives because respondents also mentioned that a *sharif khatun* should be polite, not quarrel and speak back or “interfere”. Five female respondents and two men added that the term *sharif* is vague and its meaning depends on the cultural context.

Seven women noted that being *sharif* is a flawed category and an unattainable ideal and they seemed to imply that *sharafat* is used to discipline women. Most women appeared to be much more aware of the negotiations that are involved in establishing respectability, while many male respondents seemed to view the boundaries of *sharafat* as given. Despite the small sample size, the responses confirm our own experiences and what much of the literature suggests. While the content and expectations of respectability are ambiguous and vague and depend on the individual performing *sharafat* and the person judging, everyone is familiar with the broad contours of respectability, especially its boundaries. The boundaries appear as part of common sense and are therefore hardly questioned, especially by men. The lines between *sharmati/sharmata* and *besharam* are thus porous and depend on the intersection of the social context, class, education and gender of all parties involved in social interactions.

We find that the notions, desires and expectations attached to female respectability shaped how we conducted ourselves and how we made decisions during our fieldwork. For us, as women who already occupied a paradoxical position in Pakistan’s social structure, establishing and performing respectability was important not only because it made us feel recognised as humans but also as a safeguard from harm, because respectability also means privilege, which is equal to (access to) power.<sup>20</sup> If someone violates the respectability of

19 We chose the word *khatun*, which translates in English as “lady” and is an indicator of social status, rather than the direct translation of the term woman, *aurat*, which refers more to the biological body. In the Quran the term *aurat* is used to refer to intimate parts of the body. This is why professional women are referred to as “lady judges” or “lady journalists”, rather than “woman judges” or “woman journalists”. Since we wanted to ask about respectability, *khatun* seemed more fitting. Salam Aboulhassan and Krista M. Brumley (2019: 10), studying how Arab American women understand and construct their gendered position and behaviour among the Arab diaspora in the United States, note: “Women in the Arab world were not typically referred to as a *mara* (woman), but a *sit* (lady), emphasizing her social standing, not her biological makeup. To refer to a woman as *mara* stripped her of her social standing, calling attention on to her female organs and suggesting someone worthy of little or no respect.” These findings are also relevant in the Pakistani context.

20 We concur with studies that have shown that violence is not only gendered but also classed; see Phipps 2009.



a privileged person, the likelihood that there will be repercussions for the perpetrator is high.<sup>21</sup> Hence, embodying respectability can act as a deterrent from harm, especially from those in less or equally privileged positions. In the next section we discuss ethical challenges that arose from establishing and performing respectability. In the section thereafter we discuss the ethical dilemmas that emerged from negotiating respectability in instances where established gender relations were transgressed, by accident or intention.

## Establishing respectability in our research contexts

When we enter a new setting, we make conscious and unconscious decisions on how to present ourselves. Based on what we know, we might modulate our behaviour and self-presentation, e.g. appearance, language, choice of words or content of discussions. However, we have only partial control over our self-representation because respondents and those we interact with also position us within their social matrix. How we present ourselves and how we are perceived by others impacts the quality of data collection and analysis.<sup>22</sup> In this section, we describe strategies we adopted to establish ourselves as respectable in order to build rapport with respondents. We took some of these decisions before we started data collection; others we made due to immediate experiences. Being respectable was not only important to us but also a collective duty. Our respectability also reflected on the respondents' respectability and standing in society. Being respectable is thus intricately connected to not doing harm. Hence, whether we wanted to or not, we inadvertently had to weigh our appearance and our conduct against the dominant criteria of women's respectability.

It is important to note that notions of respectability vary, because Pakistan is a multi-cultural and heterogeneous society. Thus, the particularities of performing respectability can look different, depending on the setting and a person's markers of identity. Nonetheless, some overarching traits remain the same across the country.

### Abida Bano

In the Pashtun social structure, male and female spaces are distinct, and both genders are expected to act within their domains. *Purdah* – the segregation of women – is practised widely (Chiovenda 2015). The relatively urban society in Peshawar is slightly more used to women's presence on the streets, yet women

21 This is why in many discussions related to (honour) killings and sexualised and domestic violence, perpetrators make an effort to portray the women who are victims of such crimes as dishonourable (e.g. licentious, wearing revealing clothing, being out alone in public, etc.). Because the women, allegedly, violated dominant patriarchal norms, perpetrators seek to show that violence was justified.

22 See for example Asif 2010, Guernsey 1985, Lisiak 2015, Talwar Oldenburg 1990, Zubair et al. 2012.

still have to abide by the approved cultural protocols. Social expectations for respectable women are explicit, such as wearing an appropriate dress, covering their heads in public and wearing long *chaddars*, among others. A respectable woman is not supposed to be out in public in the late evenings or late at night without family. I followed these expectations. Hence, my research visits took place between 9 am and 4 pm and I made sure to be home before dusk. Even though I was always accompanied by a male family member, it wasn't proper for me to converse with strangers in public, even in the relatively urban parts of Peshawar. These circumstances were the same in Mardan and Swat, but in those areas, *purdah* and the presence of a male companion were more important. In terms of how women researchers are treated, I discovered a few differences between the suburban areas of Peshawar and rural Mardan and Swat.

The importance of the family to a person's social identity in rural Pashtun society cannot be overstated, especially for women. They are expected to be "obedient" and "loyal" to their families (Jamal 2016). Due to the patrilineal nature of Pashtun families, everyone in the household is identified by the male head. Women don't have identities of their own; instead, they are recognised by their relation to their closest male relatives. My belonging to a respectable family was evident to many because of how I carried myself. Still, some people insisted on asking me personal questions regarding my family or workplace. The questions served as a means of establishing my origin and confirming my social identity and respectability. To satisfy my research participants, I mostly divulged details about my family, clan, place of residence and occupation. I was not always comfortable sharing that information, but it was essential for building rapport, mutual trust and transparency.

In rural areas, most Pashtuns adhere to *Pashtunwali*, a normative code to control interpersonal and group relations. The foundation of *Pashtunwali* is *nang/namoos* (honour). Women are seen as the "honour of the family"; thus, they must be careful not to compromise it (Naseer 2019). This was one of the reasons that respondents inquired about my immediate male kin. Many female respondents said to my face that I look like I come from a respectable family. They would make it clear that, despite my high level of education and residence in the city, I was expected to adhere to the criteria of being an honourable lady by dressing modestly, covering myself and refraining from mixing with strangers. One female respondent stated: "You are someone's honour, and it is good that you are carrying yourself to protect it."<sup>23</sup> These implicit and explicit statements influenced my behaviour and research, posing ethical dilemmas.

I meticulously chose my dress code for all visitations regardless of the rural-urban divide. Women are judged by their appearance,<sup>24</sup> including dress, so as

23 District Mardan, Pakistan, 2016

24 People would express their opinion on women's dress and manners very openly. Many expressed to me that I looked to be from some "good" family. "Good" referred to many things to my understanding, including economic status, mannerisms and in some instances "authentic" Pashtun lineage.

expected, I wore a *chaddar* and covered my face in all public spaces and interactions, also when interviewing male research participants. This was a specific measure to distinguish me as a “respectable” woman. I was aware that rural residents would find it disrespectful and unsettling if I didn’t wear a veil, which would impact my research collaborations.

Despite my education, career, age and position in society, I had to be accompanied by a male family member, even if he was a teenager or child because it is seen as the responsibility of men to protect women (Khalid 2014). When walking in public with my male chaperone, I lowered my gaze and timidly and quietly walked behind, not beside my male guardian, on the margins of the streets and alleys to conform and to demonstrate respectability. As expected in rural areas, I kept a certain distance from him and did not converse with him or anyone else while walking. I had known and practised these conventions all my life and did so throughout my field trips. But this required negotiating with my male guardians what I would do during the day.

Another strategy for maintaining a respectable image was to speak only at a minimum with male respondents and stay away from the male family members of female respondents. This meant it was impossible to generate a rich discussion when speaking to male respondents. Since I was conducting in-depth interviews with a semi-structured interview guide, I would pose a general query but would be unable to go deeper, establish connections or ask further questions because doing so would be considered a “forthcoming” gesture, which is discouraged for women in particular. Additionally, there were occasions when men, particularly male family members of female respondents, spoke over me, intervened and asked me questions that weren’t necessary. I did not respond, however, and I kept my word count minimal because exhibiting a greater willingness to speak with unrelated men would immediately have placed me in the *besharam* (having no respect) category.

In some instances, when I was interviewing female councillors, male relatives occasionally chimed in from outside the room to provide their opinions, casting doubt on the views of the female respondents by “demonstrating” their superior knowledge. I would listen intently to what the men had to say, just like the female respondents did, even if it had no bearing on my research. As long as I was in their home as a visitor, the family hierarchy applied to me as well (Kloß 2017). Remaining silent was a show of respect for the patriarchal heads of the houses, which I had to do because I was already doing something out of the ordinary by daring to interview women (Moghdam 1993). As a counter strategy, I waited for the male family members of my female respondents to exit the room or leave the house before I would continue my interview, since I had to remain silent due to their intrusion. This had profound logistic and emotional effects on me and my research. I lost time and energy and it increased the expense of my visits since I could not meet the day’s goal.

My willingness to comply with cultural standards also had emotional and affective repercussions. I bargained my autonomy and agency for data quality. Similar practices have been recounted by other women researchers (cf. Godbole 2014). In patriarchal societies, social expectations do not allow women to make independent choices; instead, they act according to the script in order to fit in (Kandiyoti 1988). I tried to establish respectability meticulously in order to minimise disruptions and ensure quality data collection. Moreover, I had to live and work in the same context after my field work, so being a member of that society added to the pressure to maintain my appearance and be seen as a respectable woman; I could not afford to be taken otherwise. Hence, my fieldwork was difficult logistically, but it was also distressing emotionally and affectively, and at times downright unpleasant.

### Sarah Holz

Most of my fieldwork took place in the urban context of Islamabad. As I explained earlier, gaining access to offices and institutions, securing meetings and conducting interviews was not exceedingly difficult for me because as a white foreigner I enjoyed imperial privilege and as a PhD student I did not seem too threatening. Another reason for the welcoming behaviour in offices appeared to be a certain type of curiosity: “Why would anyone, especially a foreigner, be interested in this topic?”, “Why is she here and what are we going to do with her?” were often the unspoken questions in the room (see also Amirali 2017: 147f.). When I arrived, I often overheard whispers that the German *khatun* or *bibi* (lady) had arrived. My every move was observed, hence none of my visits were confidential. I was not able to resolve this ethical dilemma. At least I was not working with vulnerable groups and I did not discuss any topics that might put respondents into danger. I did anonymise and treat my data with confidentiality when presenting and publishing my work, but for people working in these institutions during the time I was there, it was probably quite obvious whose views I was referring to.

It was clear that my presence interrupted the everyday workings in these male-dominated environments. Despite their curiosity, many respondents and their supporting staff were unsure how to treat me, at least at first. I want to note here that the support staff and colleagues were as much important actors in these situations as the respondents themselves, which should not be forgotten. The prevailing social norms determined our relations, hence they and I had to find ways to bridge discomfort and awkwardness. Our interactions often contained an element of “patriarchal performance” that was enacted primarily for the observing eyes of the other persons in the office – from the person bringing the tea to the personal secretaries who sat in the anterooms, to the colleagues and guests who often dropped in for business or a chat. As much as I was con-

cerned about my respectability, they were concerned about theirs. Association with a foreigner might enhance the status of many respondents in their work setting (Schwedler 2006), but my gender identity could also raise awkward questions. Therefore, doors were mostly kept open to signal that social distancing was observed. This meant that conversations were frequently interrupted because other people dropped in. Even though these disruptions were not conducive for conversation flows and impacted data quality, I did not attempt to ask for more privacy because I was concerned that closing doors or suggesting that we meet in another place was not compatible with respectability criteria. Like Abida Bano, I made sure to only meet during office hours, never in the evening.

When women walk in public in Pakistan, they mostly do so in pairs or groups and they do not stroll aimlessly but seek to convey a sense of purpose. I used the same strategy to put respondents and their support staff at ease. All meetings had a specific purpose, and I had concrete questions to ask. Informal interaction, a method that many anthropologists use to gain familiarity with the context, was impossible because it might have suggested a level of contact beyond a professional relationship. The formality took away from rapport building and shaped the variety and depth of information that respondents shared with me.

Respondents also did their part to normalise my presence in these male-dominated spaces. One strategy was to place me in their kinship network. I was often addressed as a daughter or sister; for this placement, my age, as well as my status as an unmarried woman, was an essential facilitating factor (Berik 1996, Joseph 1996). Assigning me a place in their kinship network signalled that they felt responsible for me, not as a friend but as a relative. It conveyed a sense of support and protection. At the same time, I also became entangled in the patriarchal norms that structure these kinship networks, which could also mean that some male respondents felt that they were in a superior position, somewhat eroding my imperial privilege (Kloß 2017, Sharp / Kremer 2006). Consequently, a certain type of patriarchal benevolence was detectable in some of these reassurances. This allowed some respondents to treat me like they might treat young female family members: I was talked over, or my questions were not taken seriously and used instead as a means to “educate me” (Radsch 2009, Khalid 2014). This prevented more detailed discussions and was only resolved if I decided to ask detailed or difficult questions that startled my counterparts because they had not expected me to have a deeper level of understanding. However, such questions could be perceived as “talking back”, which is not seen as a good trait for women. I thus had to weigh carefully whether to use this tool or not.

While my presence at the offices was accepted for a little while, the body language of some office members made it clear that they were glad to see me leave. My prolonged presence disrupted their routines; for instance, they had to explain to any person who entered the office who I was and why I was there.

When I had questions or requests, for instance to copy a file, they were performed immediately and prioritised, out of respect and deference, but I suspect also to shorten my stay. Navigating these social pressures hindered engagement and prevented me from attaining deeper levels of rapport. The established patriarchal social norms were therefore successfully enforced. My experiences stand in contrast to the fieldwork accounts of other foreign female researchers who work in patriarchal – often framed as Muslim-majority – contexts and who argue that research in such a setting is not much of a problem for women (Schwedler 2006, Radsch 2009). I find that these accounts do not focus on how gender relations and our gendered bodies affect the knowledge production process. While I concur that female researchers are treated with respect and that foreign women can conduct research in such contexts, these interactions still occur in tightly regimented patriarchal settings, a fact that impacts every aspect of research and also affects our personal lives.

My ability to understand Urdu and my choice of traditional Pakistani dress emerged as additional factors to establish respectability, because many persons saw both as signs of respect for Pakistani culture. At some point during most encounters, I would receive comments on the way I dressed. Perhaps somewhat naively, I had not expected that my choice of clothing would be a point of discussion, especially for men, or that it would impact my research. When I had worked in Pakistan before I started my PhD, I had lived with a Pakistani family. All the women of the family wore *shalwar kameez* (a long shirt and matching long pants) and *dupatta* wrapped around their shoulders (a large matching shawl); hence, I had adopted this style too.<sup>25</sup> While many foreign women wear *shalwar kameez*, few opt to wear the matching *dupatta* and even fewer wear it wrapped around their shoulders, unless in winter. To me, wearing *shalwar kameez* and *dupatta* provided a way to blend in, at least to a certain degree. It gave me a feeling of safety because it felt like a shield against the constant male gaze. Many respondents appreciated my willingness to adopt the “Pakistani style”. Meant as praise, such comments, especially when uttered by men, nonetheless sometimes made me feel uncomfortable, because they drew attention to the constant male gaze on my body. This made me very conscious of my every move, my gender identity and the fact that I was often the only woman in an office.

In more international settings or when interacting with Pakistani who might consider themselves more “liberal”,<sup>26</sup> the fact that I was wearing a *dupatta* around my shoulders caused a range of reactions, from jokes to furrowed brows and rather

25 Respectability and class status are also expressed by the colour, pattern, quality of cloth and cut of the *shalwar kameez*. Like most well-situated urban women, I bought my *shalwar kameez* in the high street shops and thus also conveyed a certain social status.

26 For lack of a better word, I am using the term liberal in quotation marks and cautiously because such labels can be easily misunderstood.



condescending remarks.<sup>27</sup> Some people quipped that it was funny to see a foreigner wear “traditional” clothes while Pakistani women had started to wear “Western” clothes. Others gave me reproachful looks and indirectly conveyed that I was feeding into patriarchal structures and providing fodder for conservatives, who could use my example to tell Pakistani women that they should continue veiling. It was impossible to withdraw from this contested global debate related to (Muslim) women, veiling, “empowerment” and agency.<sup>28</sup> Thus, my choice of clothing became a research ethics dilemma: Was I going a step too far, supporting patriarchal power structures and “misrepresenting” “Western” values, or was I merely respecting local conditions? For me, the choice boiled down to my level of comfort and the need to feel safe and respected. Other scholars have reported similar decision-making procedures. My choice of clothing was also a “covert subversion of the male-dominated world”, both in Pakistan and in Euro-America (Talwar Oldenburg 1990: 261), because I consciously chose to block the male gaze (*ibid.*: 273) rather than feel uneasy in an attempt to “represent” so-called “Western” values via my body and my choice of clothing. While many situations were beyond my control, the way I dressed was the one thing I could determine (Lisiak 2015). Moreover, all choice of clothing in all circumstances is conditioned by external circumstances. I could use my choice to blend in and to complicate black-and-white thinking because I did not fit in with prevalent expectations on any side.

As the accounts show, both of us tried to perform respectability through identity or impression management: we modulated our conduct, mobility and choice of clothing to fit general patriarchal expectations. We were aware that these choices are not only personal but embedded in larger debates around Westernisation and “clashes of civilisations” and it was impossible for us to withdraw from these discourses. We made choices that were framed by dominant conditions but that were also informed by our comfort and our wish to appear respectable. Simply by being in public places, moving around and asking questions, we were already subverting patriarchal structures to a certain degree.

## Navigating respectability in the case of transgressions

While we took some measures to establish respectability, we were often confronted with situations where respondents, intentionally or unintentionally, transgressed patriarchal codes of conduct and social norms. We had to react

27 It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the reactions of foreigners in Pakistan (the so-called expat community) or Pakistani diaspora in Pakistan. These reactions are framed by Western-centric conceptions of empowerment, freedom and agency.

28 See Fluri 2011, Lisiak 2015, Mahmood 2005, Mohanty 1987, Schwedler 2006, Zubair et al. 2012.



immediately but felt uneasy. This feeling stayed with us and these incidents prompted us to reconsider our actions and reactions and what we were willing to “endure” to collect data (Johnstone 2019, Kloß 2017). Hence, we had to navigate respectability. This is why we consider these instances critical events that constitute ethical challenges. They were productive because they forced us to reflect on our research practices, and they allowed us deep “accidental” insights into the context in which we were working. Such “‘accidental’ moments in the field”, as Lee Ann Fujii suggests, are generally considered “non-data” but are significant to understanding the broader social and research context (Fujii 2014: 2).

## Abida Bano

Since I shared the culture, language and context with my research participants, I first believed I would not need assistance navigating challenging situations. I had pre-planned some of my fieldwork, including safety precautions such as adhering to gender and cultural conventions. To my amazement, however, I encountered many unforeseen circumstances that emotionally taxed me and I did not have the tools to deal with them. Deflection and acquiescence were my go-to strategy to get around tricky circumstances in the field. This was an instantaneous and reflexive reaction rather than a calculated action.

For instance, several of my female respondents or their family members would enquire about my marital status and, if I were, who my husband was. If not, why was I not married? They asked about my monthly pay, where my family is and what they do. Sometimes, I gave honest responses to these inquiries. Other times, I tried to change the topic or to give the bare minimum of details. I didn’t want to reveal to respondents that I was unmarried since in rural regions it was unusual for my age and might characterise me as “autonomous”. Such attributes would place me in an unreliable and suspicious group and question my respectability. Although it was vital to protect myself and my family, I felt burdened when I failed to address respondents’ questions fully. I believed I owed them for voluntarily agreeing to participate in my study. Marcel Mauss (1954) stated long ago that a researcher is indebted to anybody who has ever assisted them in their research, whether by granting access to the field or by providing data or a life narrative (see also Johansson 2015). This debt-based connection assumes a notion of reciprocity that obligates a researcher to make some form of repayment, and it presents ethical dilemmas to inexperienced fieldworkers. I frequently struggled with this issue and persuaded myself that speaking less and sharing fewer details was necessary in order to preserve my respectability.

Another situation when I felt helpless was when male respondents asked to conduct their interviews in spaces that are generally reserved for men. As men-

tioned earlier, I chose the local council offices as the preferred interview location since all my respondents were locally elected council members. Still, I let respondents choose the interview location. Many male councillors chose their *hujrah* as the location for the interview. The *hujrah* is an annexe to a private home where unrelated male guests and visitors are lodged and entertained. In the Pashtun social system, *hujrah* refers to the complete male social sphere where men interact with other men in the community, visitors and bystanders. Women, whether related or unrelated, do not enter the *hujrah*. As explained earlier, I carefully conducted my research without excessively transgressing the bounds of dominant norms and culture. Even though I would have never chosen *hujrah* as an interview location, I went along with it.

Due to my upbringing and socialisation, I was well aware of the status of women in society and knew where they should go and stay. Even with my face covered, I felt uncomfortable entering a *hujrah*. It was the first time in my adult life that I had sat in a *hujrah* and spent time there. It did not feel right. I felt disrespected and uncomfortable when I had to conduct interviews in the *hujrah* since it is not how respectable women are treated in Pashtun culture. By being there, I was overstepping boundaries, which would raise eyebrows. Given their awareness that I came from a similar culture and background, I wondered why male interviewees picked the *hujrah* for the interview. Did they see me as an outsider, unfit to enter their homes?

I felt I was viewed as an outsider because of various identification markers, such as being an educated, relatively independent working woman, which others have also observed in postcolonial contexts (Crean 2018, Godbole 2014, Miriyoga 2019). Was I not respectable enough to be seated in someplace other than *hujrah*, which was like a traffic junction all the time? Men would stop by, sit down, drink tea and then depart. I felt subjected to the unavoidable male gaze more than in other public settings. Whenever there would be disruptions due to guests' arrival at the *hujrah*, I would lower my head, stop the interview, and slide to the corner to feel invisible. Even with my long *chaddar* and veil, as well as my bent head to prevent eye contact – choices I made to block the male gaze (see Talwar Oldenburg 1990) – if I had had the choice, I would have preferred not to be there.

The societal rule is that women should not speak much, get too comfortable or make requests of unrelated men. Since I believed that speaking up or asking to change the location would damage my reputation and my rapport with my respondent and the onlookers, I instead remained silent and shrank a little more. Thus, despite feeling uncomfortable with the circumstances and conflicted about my decisions, I carried on with my interview, even if this meant entering a *hujrah*. All female respondents, in contrast, opted to have their interviews conducted at their homes, which provided me with some peace of mind and privacy to do in-depth interviews.

Interactions with respondents and bystanders were impacted by various forms of patriarchal control. These disruptions and constraints had ethical as well as practical ramifications. As in Sarah Holz's case, none of the interviews with male respondents in the *hujrah* were confidential because of the visitors, another ethical dilemma that I could not mitigate because the respondents had chosen the venue. Moreover, interviews with the male respondents were not as rich due to limited contact, the presence of male visitors and my discomfort in the *hujrah*.

My privacy and identity were also in jeopardy. Being asked personal questions and conducting interviews in the *hujrah* put ideas of female respectability into question. Many male respondents seemed to treat me like any other (male) visitor and I wasn't seen as respectable enough to be hosted at their homes. Did they "overlook" my gender? Or perhaps, since I was out in public, did they assume it was okay for me to occupy male social places? Or was the invitation to the *hujrah* a form of disciplining me for pushing boundaries? Whatever the reason, they did not show me the courtesy of asking whether I was comfortable sitting in the *hujrah* or if I would rather sit in a private area (perhaps in their home). Men typically move out of the way and allow women to enter a house when they knock on someone's door, even if the men don't know the woman. However, the typical treatment for a woman researcher like me defied social expectations and was unique. I realised that mostly only those women whose male family members are known to the community's residents receive respectability. Though I was an insider with certain advantages, being a woman and a researcher placed me at the margins of society, having less autonomy and agency (Johnstone 2019).

Reflecting on these experiences, I see my field research experience as a continuous struggle between various positionalities – respectable woman, native researcher, foreign-qualified and university professor. To facilitate my access to study participants, I occasionally forwent certain advantages granted to women, disregarded slights, made fun of them or simply put up with them (Mwangi 2019). I managed the fieldwork dynamics rather well, but the emotional pain from the concessions I had to make has lingered longer than I had anticipated. These unexpected occurrences provide additional data for comprehending the social environment of the field context (Fujii 2014). I became aware of the disparate and contradictory treatment of women in society at various levels, which not only irritated me but also led me to doubt the expectations and concepts of a woman's respectability in my culture. To sum up, respectability is an exclusive practice reserved for women who support dominant patriarchal ideologies and seem to "know their place".

## Sarah Holz

Like Abida Bano, there were a few instances during my field research in Pakistan that made me feel uneasy. A seemingly minor situation that I encountered frequently, especially during social gatherings, was that some men greeted me by extending their hand for a handshake. Men and women who are unrelated commonly do not shake hands in Pakistan, which is generally read as a sign of familiarity. In such a situation, I had to evaluate the circumstances instantly: Should I ignore social customs and shake hands even though it made me feel uncomfortable? Should I refuse the handshake and risk dismaying and potentially embarrassing the other person? How was I to interpret the offer to shake hands? It could be a sign of respect for “Western” customs; it could be a way for respondents to demonstrate their “liberalism, tolerance and open-mindedness”. Did respondents think that I would not mind, or even not notice this breach of gender relations? Hence, was the offer to shake hands a deliberate transgression and a way to assert their superiority (Johnstone 2019, Kloß 2017)?

In some instances, I shook hands out of reflex and courtesy because I was too surprised and blindsided. On the one hand, I felt disrespected because I was treated differently than Pakistani women. On the other hand, I benefitted from my status as a foreigner because I was afforded much more privilege than Pakistani women and I felt I should therefore not complain about seemingly minor transgressions. On other occasions, I took a step back to increase the physical distance to the person offering to shake my hand and I touched my heart with the right hand in greeting. This refusal also caused discomfort because I felt like I was being rude and had publicly slighted my counterpart.

These instances also raised questions about future interactions: Was the offer to shake hands a gesture of good will or an “innocent” overstepping, or could it be the start of complicated interactions because the respondent might interpret my acquiescence as a silent approval and a possible invitation to transgress gender norms in the future? Or was I being too sceptical, seeing problems where there were none? These considerations significantly affected how I conducted myself because I was constantly monitoring myself.

Often, I felt that being a white woman, as compared to a white male researcher, was advantageous because I was seen as less threatening (Schwedler 2006, Radsch 2009).<sup>29</sup> Male respondents did not seem to feel the need to compete for power and “manliness” with me. However, my imperial privilege also seemed to provoke some men to use their “maleness to redress the power imbalance” (Johnstone 2019: 87) that my skin colour, education and nationality created, by transgressing gender norms and imposing their will on me. Hence, I concur with Lyn Johnstone, who observed from her research interactions with

29 This impression is based on observations from international conferences and workshops in Pakistan where white, male, foreign researchers were present, as well as from conversations where respondents talked about their experiences with male, foreign researchers.

male politicians in Rwanda and Zimbabwe that “while I might have had more power as a white researcher [...], it is reasonable to infer that as a woman I had less” (Johnstone 2019: 87).

In both of our cases, these uncomfortable encounters might seem small and inconsequential but they carried meaning. They affected how we interacted with people, who we spoke to and how we moved around. These incidents also touched us on a personal level. It could be argued that these are occupational hazards that we have to deal with. The advice would therefore be to distance the personal self from the professional self, but this ignores the deeply personal discomfort that these situations elicit. From the existing literature to our experiences and what we heard from other scholars, it is clear that such unexpected and confusing instances occur frequently. It is necessary to open up space for discussion and to examine how patriarchal structures impact research in Pakistan and elsewhere. We do not want to remain silent because this would mean complicity with patriarchy (Eltahawy 2016). While we might not be able to change the structural inequalities as such, by simply having a discussion and practising the ethics of care, we hope to take a first step toward preparing other researchers and alleviating their worries.

The negotiation of respectability was central to our interactions, and writing about these norms might help others devise coping strategies. Respectability is frequently employed as an exclusionary measure by members of dominant groups to discipline those who do not neatly fit in established categories. Through our presence as women researchers in patriarchal contexts we were doing boundary work that can provoke different reactions. The consequences of this boundary work and the potential implications for our safety, security and wellbeing are marked by uncertainty and volatility, which rendered both of us, and any person who does not neatly fit in patriarchal hierarchies, vulnerable.

## Conclusion

Our experiences of conducting qualitative political science research as women researchers underscores the anticipated and unanticipated research ethics challenges that researchers face in patriarchal and volatile contexts. In order to help others better prepare for uncomfortable situations, we highlight the significance of telling the stories of women researchers’ struggles in the field. The experiences of male researchers in patriarchal settings also require greater attention.

Most of the literature emphasises the researcher’s mindfulness of the research participants’ ethics and cultural protocols in ideal settings, but fewer studies talk about the vulnerabilities of researchers in fieldwork<sup>30</sup> beyond more extreme

30 See Chong 2008, Jabeen 2013, Mićanović et al. 2019, Sharabi 2020, Sohl 2018.

situations such as experiences of violence, crisis and hostility. The costs of emotional labour have already been acknowledged in other fields of research, for instance in connection to sensitive topics or conflict research (Schulz et al. 2022); discussions on patriarchal contexts can learn from the existing literature and contribute new perspectives.

We want to draw attention to the prevalence of seemingly insignificant events that create unease and ethical dilemmas. These incidents are more subtle and confusing than outright harassment and violence. From the perspective of dominant notions of patriarchal respectability, our mobility (in the form of travel but also the fact of our presence in male-dominated spaces), our inquisitiveness and curiosity during interviews and conversations, as well as our status as professional researchers and women who were working outside of the home, elicited most of the ethical dilemmas we encountered. Hence, we were constantly doing some form of boundary work, which was draining. In this article, we included reflections by many scholars who were in similar ethical dilemmas to demonstrate the pervasiveness of such negotiations. These references can also serve as a reading list for those who might find themselves in similar situations and who are looking for guidance.

As various feminist scholars have pointed out, in a patriarchal society, gender relations are consequential; we and our respondents were hyper-aware of our gendered bodies. As researchers, we were not sure where we fit in the patriarchal hierarchy. The theoretical choice seemed straightforward; the lived reality was much more nuanced and complex. If we wanted to be treated like respectable women this would mean that specific spaces and topics would be closed to us. If we wanted to be treated as professional researchers, where gender was of secondary importance, this would mean that we would encounter more situations that were uncomfortable. Both of us had to decide how far we were ready to compromise or push the boundaries of gender relations to advance our research, and where we had to draw the line.

Then, there was our general desire to support the work of women researchers on a larger scale. Through our work, we might advance change in gender relations, for instance, by normalising the presence of women in spaces dominated by men, such as the *hujrah*. However, boundary work comes at the expense of our comfort and self-respect. Moreover, by acquiescing and transgressing, we might inadvertently contribute to stereotypes of women professionals, Western-educated Pakistani women or white foreign women. For our protection and safety, and to ensure that we could return to our research setting and interact with people again, we tried to negotiate expectations of respectability through dress code, body language and behaviour. We made these decisions consciously and unconsciously. In some circumstances, we had time to deliberate; in others, we had to act quickly.

What we learned is that we do not have to adhere to rigid structures blindly; instead we can identify pressure points to push, more or less safely. Such assessments require immersion and careful observation, being conscious of existing privileges and cleavages and paying attention to existing and emerging public debates. Some of these points might be easily overlooked by others but they are significant to us. It is crucial to uphold the ethics of care, establish limits and place an emphasis on well-being rather than continual endurance, since both our personal and professional welfare are important.<sup>31</sup>

Any issue related to gender is contentious in Pakistan and elicits strong reactions. Whether we want to or not, we are part of these debates and have to situate our choices in these volatile circumstances. For now, we reconcile with our role as slightly suspect and provocative “lady researchers” because we know that our mere presence disrupts highly gendered environments.

31 See Corbera et al. 2020, Günel et al. 2020, Kloth 2017, Lombardi 2022, Mianovi 2019.



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