

**ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL**Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 03 No. 02. Apr-Jun 2025. Page#.1158-1173

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.3.2.019) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.3.2.019)<https://doi.org/10.55966/assaj.2025.3.2.019>Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://openjournal.org/)**Experiences of Emotional Labour: Narratives of Men from Islamabad****Dr. Saira Batool**

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the sociocultural and emotional experiences of men with the identity of sole bread earner for their families in Islamabad, Pakistan. Patriarchy as a social systems position men as dominant figures in both public and private spheres, yet simultaneously impose standardized sociocultural burdens on men for societal approval, enforces them to play the role of head of the household after the death of a father. Drawing upon the feminist lens, this research critically examines how men internalizes institutionalized norms during the process of gendered socialization and perform socially constructed masculine ideals through emotional regulation, suppression, and resilience. Using a Foucauldian discourse analysis, an approach typically considered one of the main qualitative data analysis methods. Interviews were conducted by taking life histories of 20 men having diverse sociocultural orientation and social status. The study underscores the social and emotional cost of conforming to rigid gender roles, focusing on how emotional burdens are ignored at the name of meeting societal expectations and maintaining masculine identity. This research contributes to sociological literature on sociology of men by expanding the discourse on male emotional labor and mental health, advocating for more inclusive gender-sensitive policies.

Keywords: Sole Breadwinner, Emotional Labor, Hegemonic Masculinity, Patriarchy, Psychological Burden, Islamabad, Gender Norms.

Introduction

The cultural design of gender roles in patriarchal countries, notably in South Asia, has historically established men as major breadwinners and women as caretakers (Goldstein et al., 2025). While this normative expectation offers males structural dominance in both public and private arenas, it simultaneously imposes a deep emotional and socio-psychological burden often disregarded in popular discourse. It is expected that males, despite their internal troubles, portray perseverance, serenity, and stoicism in the position of breadwinner, which is both an economic burden and an emotive performance (Quindoza et al., 2025). In many traditional societies as Pakistan as well, males are considered as the financial providers of their families and cultural patterns are expected from them to maintain an image of strength and stability, even when they are overwhelmed with feelings of stress, sadness, dissatisfaction, and unhappiness (Janssens, 2024). Using this sociological theoretical

frameworks, the study delves into the daily experiences of men who are the sole breadwinners in their families, specifically looking at how they deal with emotional labor, the ways in which they control their feelings and expressions to conform the societal expectations, the consequences of lack of emotional support on their mental health, and the ways in which the clash of masculinity and economic responsibility leaves them vulnerable. Both the invisibility of men's emotional difficulties in patriarchal settings and the expansion of emotional labor theory's applicability outside occupational areas are challenged by this investigation. This initiates a unique discourse on masculinity, mental health (Parry, 2021), and the need to reinterpret prevailing stories of male domination in the context of provider identity.

The cultural norm of the male breadwinner may seem eternal at first glance, but examinations of the past reveal that this is not always the case. The notion that males should be the only breadwinners in the family is a relatively recent invention, molded by industrialization, post-war economic policies, and social engineering in the middle of the twentieth century, according to Chris Bourn (2019). In pre-industrial and working-class societies, men and women alike were vital to the survival of the family economy. Bourn's historical criticism recasts male economic domination not as an inherent or inevitable feature of society but as an effect of culturally reinforced and socially normalized economic, political, and social norms (Fan, 2021).

Patriarchal cultures in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India associate economic provision with manhood and family honor. Despite women's growing involvement in the labor market, historical, religious, and socioeconomic factors continue to reinforce the assumption of males as the main breadwinners and assign women carer tasks (Akanle & Nwaobiala, 2019). Consequences of this rigid division of labor include financial strain, psychological and physiological stress, problems bridging the gap between the workplace and the home, and emotional isolation. As a result of the ever-increasing cost of living, most Eastern cultures' main breadwinners, males, face an immense financial strain, especially in cities like Islamabad. Their financial burden is exacerbated by the need to provide for extended family members. No one wants to talk about men's mental health, even if they are exhausted, stressed out, and maybe depressed from always having to provide for their families. Brooks and Devasahayam (2011) argue that relationship problems arise between these men and their families as a result of their inability to strike a balance between their jobs and personal lives despite their lengthy work hours and family obligations. Fahim and Kabir (2023) asserted that men are culturally discouraged from displaying vulnerability, in contrast to women, who often have social support networks for expressing their feelings.

Within a larger theoretical and historical context, this study is located within various sociological discourses by highlighting the critical necessity to examine the cultural and social assumptions for constructing gender roles. It is a product of its time that places an unfair economic and emotional burden on men. This study shed light on how an individual takes multiple financial, social, and cultural responsibilities, ultimately leading to continuous emotional labor and dissatisfaction. These men who are exhibiting domination and masculine identities in their day-to-day activities are suffering burdens and identity crises. The paper also examines how patriarchy, emotional labor, and economic survival have an intricate relationship in the lives of contemporary men, among other members of their families.

This study incorporates Hoschchild's lens of emotional labor to the context of sole breadwinner men by expanding discussion towards gender studies, bringing men's discourses of emotional burdens, feelings of stress, and social isolation into a contemporary sociological academic debate. It contributes to the sociological understanding of men's mental health, economic stress, and work-family dynamics, authority within responsibility in traditional gendered societies (Gruson-Wood, Rice, Haines, & Chapman, 2021). Furthermore, it highlights the urgent need for social change and support systems that acknowledge and address the emotional labor faced by men, ultimately fostering a more balanced and equitable gender discourse in South Asia (Sorensen, 2017).

The study is constructed under following research questions:

Q-1. What are the lived experiences of sole breadwinners specifically with their mothers, sisters and relatives as primary social relationships?

Q-2. How do sole breadwinners perceive and describe their roles and responsibilities?

Q-3. How do sole breadwinners maintain their social and emotional well-being?

Literature Review

A recent reflective piece published in Business Insider (2024) gives us a personal account by Gran (2024) that explores the intricate emotional and psychological dimensions of being the single breadwinner in the context of a contemporary family setting. The author discusses in depth the intense feelings of duty, the pressure of expectations, and the intricacies of identity that are integral to the position of the main provider. Even though it is only celebrated in the cultural myths, the work of the sole provider comes with a load of anxiety, the fear of not being enough, and inner conflict feelings that are often left unspoken due to social pressure surrounding masculinity and accomplishment. The author asserts that bread winning goes beyond simple fiscal obligation, involving a deep emotional journey. Every financial setback can feel like a personal failure, and every triumph is colored with a latent fear of not being able to sustain stability. The article significantly points out the tendency to suppress emotional vulnerability in the interest of displaying strength, resilience, and competence, echoing Arlie Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor, whereby individuals control and conceal their true feelings to fit into societal or family norms. This narrative adds to the existing database of scholarly studies by shedding light on the poorly understood emotional responsibility borne by the sole providers. This highlights the enduring power of deeply ingrained gender norms encouraging men to correlate their self-image with economic provisioning, often at the expense of their mental well-being. The issues that are discussed in the article are fully parallel to research on male breadwinners' stress in patriarchal cultures, providing a contemporary Western counterpoint to the lives of Islamabad's sole breadwinner men, who in turn struggle with financial stress, emotional constraint, and social pressures in silence. Research shows that taking on primary financial duties can have negative consequences for men's physical and mental health (Devi & George, 2022).

Peukert (2018) asserted that the psychological health and well-being of men were at their worst when they were the sole burden of family sustenance. In this era, men evidenced a 5% lower psychological well-being score and 3.5% lower health score than in periods when their partners had an equal contribution towards household earnings. This decline can be attributed to social norms that identify masculinity with the position of money earner, leading to increased stress and a deep feeling of

obligation among men to maintain their breadwinner status. In the Pakistani situation, these stresses are compounded by economic difficulties. A 2025 survey of World Bank showed that 74% of urban Pakistani families were struggling to meet their monthly costs from their current earnings, which led 10% of them to look for additional part-time work. Financial pressure weighs most heavily on men, who have traditionally been viewed as the primary breadwinners (Goldstein et al., 2025).

The societal structure in Pakistan frequently upholds conventional gender roles, wherein men are anticipated to assume the role of providers, while women are relegated to the responsibilities of care-giving. Departures from this standard may result in societal disapproval. Shah (2023) examined the experiences of stay-at-home fathers in Islamabad, revealing that these individuals encountered considerable social stigma, often subjected to negative labeling and scrutiny regarding their masculinity. The stigmatization was distinctly observable in rural regions and within extended family frameworks, where conventional norms are more deeply entrenched. In a comparable manner, men who find themselves incapable of fulfilling the breadwinner role due to unemployment or various other circumstances frequently encounter societal stigma and experience a profound sense of isolation. Shah (2023) posited that men in Pakistan experience significant stress stemming from economic pressures, with numerous individuals grappling with feelings of inadequacy when they fail to fulfil societal expectations regarding financial provision. The pervasive stress is exacerbated by an absence of candid dialogues surrounding men's mental health, resulting in an acute sense of isolation and helplessness. The expectation for men to assume the role of primary breadwinners can significantly influence the dynamics within a family unit.

Financial strain may induce stress within marital relationships and diminish engagement in familial activities. On the other hand, when women are perceived to play a substantial role in household income, it may challenge existing power dynamics, occasionally resulting in friction if not approached with a spirit of mutual comprehension. Shah (2023) observed that Pakistani women who serve as breadwinners frequently face societal criticism while their male counterparts grapple with feelings of inadequacy. This underscores the necessity for a transformation in social attitudes regarding gender roles. The role of sole breadwinner men in Islamabad is fraught with numerous psychological, social, and relational intricacies. The pressures exerted by societal expectations and the heavy load of financial responsibilities markedly intensify stress and health issues for these individuals. Addressing these challenges requires a thorough approach, which includes promoting candid discussions about men's mental health, reassessing traditional gender roles, and implementing policies that support fair economic responsibilities within families.

Theoretical Framework

This current research takes its theoretical and methodological strengths from distinctive sociological frameworks such as Arlie Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor, R.W. Connell's (1995) notion of hegemonic masculinity, and Foucauldian discourse analysis. Collectively, these frameworks offer rigorous analytical perspectives for examining the intricate reciprocation of emotions, gender norms, and societal expectations in a discursive and rhetorical manner. The central concept of Emotional labor used in this research acquired its conceptual foundations from the renowned sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her seminal work, *The Managed*

Heart (1983); refers to the process by which individuals manage and sometimes suppress their own emotions to fulfill the emotional requirements of their job roles. This involves aligning one's personal feelings with organizational expectations to produce appropriate emotional displays during official interactions. While Hochschild's research primarily focused on service-oriented professions, this study has been extended to understand the experiences of sole breadwinner men under the lens of emotional labor theory.

In many Eastern societies, including Pakistan, men are traditionally expected to fulfill the role of the primary financial provider. This societal expectation burdens men emotionally, requiring them to exhibit unwavering strength, resilience, and composure, regardless of their internal emotional state, due to unfair social circumstances. The pressure to conform to these feeling rules necessitates significant emotional regulation, as men may feel compelled to suppress vulnerabilities such as fear, anxiety, or sadness to maintain the facade of the dependable provider (Quindoza et al., 2025).

This study explores and explains that this form of emotional labor is not confined to the workplace but prevails in various aspects of life, including socialization, family interactions, and social relationships. The constant need to manage masculine identity for societal approval often conceals true emotions, resulting in emotional dissonance; the feeling of lack of emotional support, loneliness, and alienation leads to profound implications for mental stress and feelings of hopelessness and sadness as men in eastern societies are always dictated by the power structure to suppress their emotions and to express their feelings to manifest the role of domination. According to a study by Shah (2024), the societal pressure to display socially sanctioned feelings can result in emotional exhaustion, stress, and burnout. Over time, this long-lasting emotional burden may contribute to more severe mental health issues, including depression and anxiety disorders.

By complementing the primary lens of this research, Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity is employed to understand in-depth exploration and explanation of how certain ideals of manhood become dominant and culturally glorified while subordinating alternative masculinities. According to Parry (2021), hegemonic masculinity promotes traits such as toughness, economic dominance, emotional restraint, and self-sufficiency as the standard against which all men are continuously evaluated throughout their lives. This study constructs its argument that in patriarchal societies like Pakistan, the male breadwinner model forms a central pillar of this hegemonic ideal. Men are expected to support families financially and maintain authority and emotional control, reinforcing power hierarchies within familial and societal structures. This framework also helps elucidate the experiences of those men who deviate from the socially constructed breadwinner ideal and face social stigma, judgments, and rejection. The findings of the study also reveal that men often view emotional expression as a threat to their masculine identity and social credibility, choosing instead to suffer in silence. Furthermore, recognizing that the breadwinner role contributes to internalize performance pressure, compelling men to equate their self-worth with their economic and emotional contributions.

By integrating Hochschild's emotional labor theory and Connell's hegemonic masculinity, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how patriarchal structures not only shape gender roles but also regulate internal emotional states. These

theoretical lenses collectively illuminate how emotional suppression, emotional strain, and masculine role performance are deeply interwoven in the lived experiences of sole breadwinner men, making visible the otherwise hidden burdens they carry in silence (Shah, 2024). Moreover, the societal stigma surrounding male vulnerability often discourages men from seeking emotional support and stops them from expressing their struggles, further exacerbating feelings of isolation and distress. The internalization of these pressures underscores the need for a broader societal shift towards acknowledging and addressing men's emotional well-being in traditional provider roles.

In Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan, the interplay of traditional cultural norms and modern socioeconomic challenges intensifies the emotional labor experienced by men. Rapid urbanization, economic pressures, and shifting family dynamics contribute to the complexity of fulfilling the provider role. Men always face intense expectations in the cultural systems to maintain financial stability amidst rising living costs while adhering to cultural norms that valorize stoicism and self-reliance. Understanding the emotional labor inherent in the role of breadwinner is crucial for developing targeted interventions. Such interventions include creating support networks, promoting open dialogues about male emotional health, and challenging traditional norms that hinder emotional expression.

Material and methods

A qualitative research method was applied to conduct this study, as this method allowed the researcher to comprehend the richness and complexity of men's lived experiences in a more detailed manner. The present study is particularly focused on men-only narratives with an age bracket of 20-35. All these men are the only males in their families and become head of the household after the death of their father, and this is a criterion developed for purposive sampling.

Twenty men (married and unmarried) from different social, cultural, and economic backgrounds were selected. Life histories and observations were conducted. Researchers captured the depth of their emotions, challenges, coping mechanisms, and personal struggles. Discourse Analysis was employed for data analysis as it is a way to study how people talk, feel, act, and behave and to understand how language operates in the social world (Jansen, 2023). Discourse analysis exposed and revealed those taken-for-granted assumptions that are truly enclosed in the gendered experiences of men. The informants' discourses were specific, and logical and empirical evidence supported the outcomes of accepted facts in their lives (Billig, 1997; Foucault, 1972). Hence, the voices of informants based on discourses are taken as logical, persuasive, and practical in their lived experiences (Hall, 1990; Potter and Wetherell, 1995). Researchers paid close attention to the context in which their language was used by considering the social and cultural settings. By doing this, the study aimed to understand the words independently and to unpack meanings enveloped in the lived experiences. This rhetorical process of unveiling the statements of individuals leads to the generation of themes and patterns in their statements. Ethical concerns were central to the entire research process. Table 1 shows the socioeconomic and demographic profile of selected informants:

Sr. No	Informants' Name	Informants' Age	Informants' Age at the Time of	Informants' Academic Qualification	Informants' family size	Informants' Marital Status	Informants' Occupation
1	Haider	24	15	Matric	5	Unmarried	Businessman
2	Rehan	26	13	MS	4	Unmarried	Private Job
3	Haris	27	16	Bachelors	5	Unmarried	Private Job
4	Ayaz	29	15	B.Com	5	Unmarried	Govt Servant
5	Mujtaba	22	16	B.A	4	Unmarried	Private Job
6	Salman	26	17	ACCA	4	Unmarried	Businessman
7	Babar	26	14	Matric	5	Unmarried	Mechanic
8	Hamza	25	13	FSC	4	Unmarried	Security
9	Umar	21	16	Matric	7	Unmarried	Tailor
10	Mohsin	21	10	FSC	5	Unmarried	Self Employed
11	Taimor	27	12	B.Com	6	Unmarried	Govt Servant
12	Hamza	26	11	B.A	4	Unmarried	Private Job
13	Qaisar	25	15	B.A	6	Unmarried	Govt Servant
14	Ahmed	27	16	Bachelors	4	Unmarried	Private Job
15	Adeeb	28	14	Bachelors	5	Unmarried	Private Job
16	Sharjeel	25	12	I. Com	5	Unmarried	Private Job
17	Hassan	26	13	Bachelors	6	Unmarried	Freelancer
18	Ubaid	22	12	Masters	4	Unmarried	Businessman
19	Daniyal	23	14	BSc	5	Unmarried	Freelancer
20	Sakhawat	24	15	F.A	7	Unmarried	Self Employed

Findings and Discussion

• Shattered Aspiration and Deferred Dreams

The findings of the study reveal that lost aspirations and unfulfilled potential due to the loss of loved ones lead to abrupt life course alterations. Most participants directly relate their academic, professional, and professional dreams with paternal support. All of them narrated that the father's role is very significant in the institution of family, measured in terms of material benefits and great emotional support. The father's death is related to the modification of roles, which demands sacrifices and social adjustments. As one of the informants stated:

"If my father were still alive, I would be studying at a prestigious international university and running a successful business at a high level, instead of 9 to 5 restless job without professional and academic growth".

As narrated above, individuals have many fantasies about their academic and professional development specifically men. They are socially designed to acquire the breadwinner role, but their real-life experiences are completely different. It also illustrates that structural factors (Fahim & Kabir, 2023), such as the premature assumption of economic responsibility, interrupt individuals' ability to pursue personal goals, ultimately reinforcing them to take a substitution role in patriarchal families. This participant is symbolically "filling in" for the father at the cost of his development. The response also indirectly reflects emotional labor, where the

individual suppresses grief and ambition to meet imposed responsibilities and gendered expectations.

Another informant expressed his feelings in these words.

"I was passionate about studying biology, and my father wanted us all to become doctors. I, too, wanted to pursue a career in medicine. However, everyone interfered and said, 'What will he do in the future?' for boys, there is no scope in this field.' They pressured me into getting admission into ICS (Intermediate in Computer Science) instead of allowing me to pursue my interest in biology."

The above narrative illuminates the gendered specific educational pathways and social conformity towards subjects with economic value in the job market. Despite the mutual desire of the informant and the deceased father for a medical career, societal pressures intervened and redirected the participant's academic life. The discourse of academic choices for the sake of a job reveals established gender-role stereotyping within Pakistani society. This gendered specification of professions and selection of academic disciplines are culturally coded as more appropriate for one gender over the other (supported by Logan, 2021) because men are considered breadwinners. This particular narrative also exemplifies the informal social control of an extended family through opinions, interference, and application of gender-specific cultural norms that override personal autonomy and familial aspirations. It also highlights a collectivist decision-making culture, where choices are not made by individuals but through communal consensus, often rooted in patriarchal perceptions of gendered labor markets. Furthermore, this narration is related to stress and powerlessness, where an individual (supported by Williams & Carter, 2021) is forced to suppress personal interests, internalize social judgments, and adjust to gender identity to meet sociocultural expectations.

Another informant expressed his difficult times in these words;

"It was difficult to see my mother to work a school maid after the death of my father. I was very young, but I decided to forgo my aspiration of becoming an engineer and started working as a data entry clerk in a small firm."

These narratives describe how the personal trajectories were altered due to the loss of the head of the house, symbolizing the reinforcement of available men to take up traditional authority in patriarchal settings. This allocation of roles is saturated with men-only identity and considered inter-generation mobility regardless of the individual's preparedness. The emotional cost of deviating from one's desired career path is evident, but it is rarely discussed how emotional labor intersects with masculinity norms. The young men not only carry financial burdens but also internalize cultural messages about how they are supposed to perform in the larger social system. Some of the informants' narratives of the present study also reveal that decisions about academic choices are not only economical but are deeply interwoven with the cultural logic of gender, class, and social respectability, acting as gatekeepers to personal development.

- **Socially Isolated Identities**

The emotional experiences of sole breadwinner men often unfold in silence and solitary rituals, revealing the invisible burdens of masculinity in patriarchal societies. Respondents in this study demonstrated a strong tendency to withdraw from social spaces and seek solitude as a coping mechanism for emotional distress. One of the informants shared her feelings in these words;

"I used to go for a walk alone, put on headphones, listen to something, then sat alone in the room, closed my eyes; I found peace in this. It gave me tranquility".

Another informant expressed his emotional pain while witnessing intact families of friends and relatives during his formative years, stating;

"I used to see children in school being picked up by their parents or going on outings, and upon seeing this, I felt a sense of inadequacy. I would become sad, shut myself in my room alone, and sometimes silently cry. I extremely missed my father his warmth, and love; this was how I found comfort and relief".

These narratives reveal how Hochschild (1983) theorized about feelings of emotional suffering and their sole efforts to engage and maintain themselves in socially acceptable emotive display through private emotional regulation rather than public disclosure. In patriarchal cultures like Pakistan, the expression of emotions like sadness and crying in men is stigmatized and associated with weakness and solitude (Connell, 1995; Hochschild, 1983). Self-communication becomes a socially permissible space for emotional release, highlighting that masculine emotional labor is often internalized and invisible

These feelings of dissatisfaction and sadness during different stages of life reflect isolation and loneliness as a coping mechanism, where private spaces become substitutes for emotional intimacy and psychological release. Informants navigate emotional pain by retreating into physical isolation and engaging in self-reflection rather than seeking external emotional support. One of the informants shared;

I used to write in my diary to empty negative energies and prepare myself with a smiling face to meet the demands of the women in my life. I am the only support system available to them. Unfortunately, I am alone.

Through sociological-led analysis, the above narrative illustrates how patriarchal cultures discourage open emotional expression from men, compelling them to internalize distress and seek self-emotional regulation rather than sharing with others. Hochschild (1983) states that these behavioral orientations demonstrate surface acting and emotional suppression. Informants cannot express their emotions in public or familial spheres due to social norms of masculine restraint, so they relieve their emotional labor in isolation. Moreover, these narratives reflect symbolic behaviors, where individuals attach meanings to their solitary rituals (e.g., walking, music, silence) as socially acceptable ways to manage grief and inadequacy while masking deeper emotional turmoil.

- **Social Judgment, Social Stigma and Stereotyping**

Research has established that men are forced to display those behavioral displays closely associated with their gender. Men faced pressure to conform to traditional masculinity norms, discouraging emotional expression (Berdahl, Cooper, Glick, Livingston, & Williams, 2018; Lee & Martinez, 2020; Williams & Carter, 2021; Patel et al., 2022). The findings of the present study unpack the reality that men are discouraged from exposing their vulnerability, weakness, and dependency because these are considered inappropriate gender attributes for them. While sharing his life history, one of the informants revealed a deep reluctance to share personal struggles due to fear of societal judgment.

"I believe that people think you are weak when you tell them personal things. When I talk about how I feel, people often take it incorrectly and judge me as if I am just trying to get sympathy".

This response articulates the hegemonic masculine ideal that equates emotional disclosure with weakness and de-legitimizes the male emotional state, reinforcing gendered norms of stoicism and emotional detachment. Emotional expression is perceived not only as a personal risk but also as a socially misinterpreted ideology that leads to withdrawal and silence. In contrast, another informant asserted that;

"I believe you need someone with whom you can discuss things and with whom you feel extremely comfortable and candid. Understanding is genuinely limited to one who has personally experienced the loss of a father or similar circumstances."

The above illustrations unpack the need for trust-based and trauma-informed emotional dialogue, suggesting that shared lived experiences (e.g., the absence of a father) are critical in fostering emotional understanding. This resonates with in-group emotional solidarity, a sociological phenomenon where marginalized individuals form bonds based on shared experiences, thus creating safe emotional spaces outside dominant norms.

In traditional cultures, appropriate emotional expression is taught to men during socialization, which is always equated with societal expectations and considered as the conscious effort to perpetuate the subordination of others. Collins (2000) states that through routinized daily practices of interaction at the micro-level of social organization, individuals (men particularly in this study) uphold the subordination of others for societal approval. One of the informants expressed, *"One should only share his sadness and stress when he achieves something. Otherwise, there is no need to share emotions because society will judge you and show sympathy, but when you succeed, society will only appreciate your emotions and vulnerabilities."*

The above quote reveals a powerful connotation of conditional emotional expression tied to masculine success. Emotional authenticity is only validated after social proof of achievement, indicating a deeply entrenched performance-based value system where men are only permitted emotional visibility once they meet instrumental success criteria (status, money, power). Most of the informants of this study internalize meritocratic masculinity at the cost of their emotional health. From the lens of emotional labor theory, this reflects a classic case of gendered performance regulating internal feelings to align with culturally appropriate emotional displays, only releasing them in moments deemed acceptable by societal standards. This also reflects approved symbolic expressions in the power structures, where men are rewarded for success and for showcasing emotional strength throughout their struggles.

Most informants shared that they are labeled as orphans by their colleagues and relatives, a term they find displeasing. This labeling caused them to feel like an excluded group. One of the informants expressed: *"In the early years of my job when I was very, for about 2-3 years, I used to feel everyone felt pity for me. When I was newly appointed at the office, they frequently mentioned things like, He is the son of so-and-so, He is an orphan, and so on. All those people around me never let me forget the death of my father."*

The above excerpt mentions that using inappropriate language and hurtful words stigmatizes persons as less capable and always needing help. This stereotyping hurts self-esteem, sense of independence, continuous feelings of grief and loss, and less interaction with colleagues, as well as reducing the chances of professional growth. These discourses of language become part of social practices and constantly

undermine the abilities of individuals, relating each social action with their social identity of being an orphanage.

12 out of 20 informants shared their feelings about an individual belonging to a socially marginalized group who needs attention, constant help and support, job references, and school and college admissions. They are always socially and intellectually undermined and can perform without the help of others. One of the informants shared his discourse of being a member of the marginalized group;

My Aunt had a son who owned a clothing store. She said he would wander around and become spoiled. Putting him to work at the shop with my son is better. He is an orphan; this will also help him with his pocket expenses, strong surveillance, and not being involved in bad company.

The above excerpt reveals how language is embedded in the sociocultural discourses of the lived experiences of individuals. It also reveals that an orphanage is alone, exposed to the ills of society, and he is expected to perform inappropriately and, therefore, needs help and supervision. This kind of help is different from what an individual gets in a time of need, but this stigmatizes him because of his identity as an orphan. This is an informal social control to meet the demands of society, fulfilling the expectations of the larger social system.

An informant shared, *"People used to say to my mother, Do not send him out. Otherwise, he will get spoiled." They believed that boys whose fathers are not alive are more likely to get involved in illegal activities than boys whose fathers are alive. It wasn't possible for me as I am the only male available to my family. I have to manage my studies and economic expenses.*"

This highlights that society intentionally targeted and attached social stigma of illegal activities, deviant behavior, and bad company with orphan men. Orphan children marginalized by society (Nguyen et al., 2016) may be seen as different or inferior because they lack a father figure. This feeling of being inferior prolongs the later stages of their lives. The social exclusion experienced by orphaned children due to stigma significantly impacts their ability to form healthy social relationships (Soyobi, Obohwemu & Suberu, 2024; Soyobi et al., 2024a; Soyobi et al., 2024b). Research has consistently shown that social stigma can lead to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and a sense of worthlessness among stigmatized individuals (Roelen, 2020; Bharti, 2023; Inglis et al., 2023). This pervasive stigma has a detrimental impact on the psychological and emotional well-being of orphan children.

- **Social Web of Exploitation**

One of the critical research questions addressing this study is the role of immediate family (mother and siblings), relatives, and people at their workplaces. Experiences of exploitation and discrimination are complex and widespread social phenomena that have negative consequences on people irrespective of gender, race, class, and ethnicity. This is also related to (Liu, 2021; Mlambo, 2021; Likoko et al., 2023) internalization of perceived prejudices and the development of negative feelings about themselves, and patients feel shame and embarrassment about having the mental illness and feeling of exploitation. Most of the respondents who participated in this study expressed that, trapped in the vicious circle of exploitation, they are compelled to meet expectations of primary and secondary social relationships. They faced constant pressure to display appropriate attitudes, behaviors, traits, and identities and keep themselves safe from the expression of stigma and socially

undesirable recognition. One of the informants shared his feelings in a shattered voice;

I lost not only my father but my mother as well because being alive (mother), she is constantly blackmailing me with each passing day. She is in grief, I know, but I lost my safe place. Whenever my father scolded me when he was alive, I took shelter in my mother's open arms. However, now my mother has become so cold that I never told her about my feelings. She always pressured me to meet her expectations. I have to marry my sisters, who have lots of dowry.

This highlights that the loss of a father can lead to a complex mixture of emotions and challenges, including feelings of exploitation and discrimination. Another informant expressed:

I am just a money-maker for my family. My mother always made me realize that my sisters are more vulnerable than me because I am a man. She used to hide money from me and expect me to generate more financial resources. I am tired of her behavior.

These experiences exposed that individual who is already vulnerable due to the loss of their fathers, exploitation, and discrimination increases their emotional distress and creates additional barriers to their development. Previous scholarly work has also established (Penner et al., 2020; Wilkerson, 2022; Cherewick et al., 2023) that lived experiences of exploitation and discourses of cultural language have been linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders. Another informant shared:

I am socially excluded from my family, friends, and relatives. My mother always compares me with my friends and cousins, but they have strong family support. I am all alone, and there is a constant cold war between me and my mother. My sisters are loving towards me.

The above excerpt indicates that these individuals are frequently isolated from their families, peers, and relatives. This isolation deprives them of the social support networks crucial for emotional and psychological resilience (Kalomo, Jun & Lee, 2022). Most of the Informants described the loving role of sisters and their willingness to contribute economically, but due to strict adherence to societal expectations, they are powerless. These institutional frameworks not only burdened men with a wide variety of economic and social expectations but also limited women's economic and professional opportunities. One of the informants shared his experiences of discrimination in these words;

I am the youngest of five sisters. I migrated to Italy after I completed my matriculation with the help of one of our relatives. I faced very harsh conditions; people were very cruel aboard. I have sleepless nights and hungry days. My sisters tried their best to convince my mother's not to send me to another country at this early age. However, she strictly refuses. All of them are highly qualified now and making money for their in-laws. However, nobody was there to support me. My mother had this understanding that people would stigmatize me for using his sisters' finances. This is not considered appropriate for men. My mother is happy. I am a success story among my relatives, but I do not have affectionate feelings towards my mother.

One of the informants shared his workplace experiences;

My boss considered me his servant, sometimes asking me to perform household chores like grocery shopping and providing pick-and-drop service to his children. When

I discussed these problems with my mother, she made me realize that I got this job with the help of my uncle. If I left the job, he would mind. My mother even convinced me to become a personal servant of my boss because this increased my chances of getting a permanent job and promotion.

This highlights the discourses of power imbalances at the workplace, illuminating life's true realities and depriving individuals of professional dignity and agency. It also indicates the vicious circle of discrimination, which negatively affects men who seek to adjust their working and family responsibilities. Survey data indicate (Woodfield, 2019) that men may also be victims of harassment or losing their jobs at their workplace, although such behavior is rarely acknowledged.

Another informant expressed:

When I arranged my sister's marriage outside the family, my Aunt came and asked for her proposal. I took a stand for my sister and refused my cousin's proposal. My Aunt now realized I was making a lot of money, so it was safe to marry his son with my sister. My sister is happy. My mother is upset and displeased with me, but I am satisfied.

In the context of a family, with the loss of a traditional economic provider, extended family members start avoiding and ignoring that particular family in their time of need. Relatives started assuming that if they had close interactions with these families, they would have to help them economically and socially. In some cases, relatives also act as surrogates for the father's role, believing it is their right and authority to dictate in terms of those preferences, which is to their greatest benefit. The findings of this study are also supported by the evidence from the previous research (Hendenl, 2022) that men are subjected to family, extended family social system, and workplace discrimination, even having a patriarchal identity to a lesser extent than women. However, they are still affected by it.

Discussion

The study's findings are elaborated at greater length with the help of discourse analysis, which exposes the power of knowledge embedded in the patriarchy as a social system. Cultural standards certificate men as the head of the household. The study's findings unpack the true realities of male-dominated systems in which men are controlled by power structure and power relations. The cultural notions and institutionalized gendered socialization determine men's role in the larger power structure.

The theoretical lenses offered by renowned sociologists such as Hochschild (1983) and Connell (1995) provide significant insights for understanding the appropriate performance and regulation of emotions within gendered systems. The initial findings highlighted that the imposition of financial responsibility after a father's death leads to repressing ambitions, dreams, and aspirations. The majority of the informants shared their lived experiences of broken dreams. The findings are also supported by the study conducted by Munsch (2016), who found that men's life journey is always equated with their financial responsibilities rather than their interests, leading to dissatisfaction and unhappiness. The feeling of emotional labor is one of the significant aspects of their lives. The study's findings are supported by Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity (1995), which depicts that emotional invulnerability and stoicism cause men to bottle up their feelings instead of reaching out for help. Research participants of this study declared that men with traditional

masculine identities tend to bury their feelings of vulnerability to project an image of power and dominance (Gush, Scott & Laurie, 2015; Haq, Usman, & Ishaq, 2022). Informants also revealed that satisfaction and happiness are at the cost of a successful Journey of life (Batool & Ali, 2020). Conventional wisdom explains that the role of men is linked with their decision-making power, emotional strength, and ability to provide for their families; this is the social construction of their gender (Bourn, 2019). In this social scenario, Dike (2024) pointed out that men socially learned to seek relief in silence and emotionally safe micro-communities due to the fear of stigmatization and marginalization. Men continually show resilience while coping with feelings of loss, anxiety, and self-doubt. According to Connell (2010) and Sear (2021), feelings of emotional weight have an invisible influence on mental health, leading to social exclusion from family and identity fragmentation. Men need more inclusive emotional support networks and to rethink economic success and happiness.

The findings of the research contributed to the sociology of men, sociology of emotions and feelings, and sociology of gender (specifically men) with unique insights about the unquestioned and unlimited authority of power structure in the lives of male residents of male-dominated societies. The study also contributed to the theoretical underpinnings of Neo-patriarchy by highlighting the role of mothers and other relative women in emphasizing, maintaining, and strengthening male authority within the family. The role of the mother is decisive in traditional families by injecting familial norms and values into their children. Gendered socialization is the key contributor to maintaining male dominance and female subordination at the cost of mental stress, social isolation, and dissatisfaction of men.

Conclusion

This study offers a critical sociological exploration and explanation of the economic, emotional, and social realities faced by sole breadwinner men in Islamabad, Pakistan. It challenges the conventional gendered frameworks of males as breadwinners to be inherently powerful and privileged, revealing the hidden feelings of emotional labor, role strain, and identity conflicts. It is evident from the findings of the research that men are required to meet economic responsibilities along with continuous regulation of male identity representations, suppression of emotional stress and vulnerability, hiding grief, and projecting strength to align with culturally prescribed masculine mores. The narratives of the participants emphasized that the deeply established gender norms not only marginalize men's emotional needs but also limit their life trajectories, forcing them to abandon personal aspirations in favor of collective familial responsibilities. Sociologically, the study underscores the urgent need to re-frame dominant narratives of masculinity by deconstructing the breadwinner ideal, acknowledging the emotional vulnerabilities of men, and institutionalizing emotional support mechanisms that validate male affective experiences without shame or stigma. Furthermore, it calls for broader gender-inclusive discourses in mental health, workplace dynamics, and family systems that recognize men's emotional labor as a legitimate and pressing concern.

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