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Rahat Shah

Angaben zur Veröffentlichung / Publication details:

Shah, Rahat. 2026. "Stay-at-home fathers and the everyday remaking of manhood in extended family contexts." *The Journal of Men's Studies* 34 (1): 123–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10608265251350284>.

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Stay-At-Home Fathers and the Everyday Remaking of Manhood in Extended Family Contexts

Journal of Men's Studies
2026, Vol. 34(1) 123–144
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DOI: 10.1177/10608265251350284

journals.sagepub.com/home/men



Rahat Shah¹ 

Abstract

Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach and guided by caring masculinity theory, this study examines the experiences of stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) within the extended families of Pakistan. Results from this study show that SAHFs not only face societal backlash and stigmatization, but their non-normative roles were viewed as violating the *family's code of honor*, a set of unspoken but widely understood norms and expectations governing the behavior of family members. They navigated their challenged masculine identities in three distinct ways, influenced by a myriad of factors, including duration in the SAHF role, social class, and educational background. Support from extended family members served as a buffer against societal stigma and criticism, playing a key role in facilitating acceptance and adaptation to the SAHF role. This highlights the transformative power of a supportive network in challenging and potentially transforming societal norms.

Keywords

stay-at-home fathers, caring masculinity, family honor, extended family, stigma, Pakistan

¹Institute of Sociology, Goethe University Frankfurt, Frankfurt, Germany

Corresponding Author:

Rahat Shah, Institute of Sociology, Goethe University Frankfurt, Eschersheimer Landstraße 121, D-60322, Frankfurt am Main, Frankfurt, Germany.

Email: rahat.shah331@gmail.com

Introductions

In recent years, societal norms regarding the distribution of domestic and professional responsibilities between men and women have undergone noticeable shifts (Rochlen et al., 2008; Tahir et al., 2022), with women increasingly participating in the workforce, while men have taken on a more significant share of domestic chores (Shah, 2024; Shah & Shah, 2024). However, despite these shifts, women in heterosexual partnerships still bear the majority of household responsibilities, even as they engage more in professional work (Shah, 2024). This scenario suggests that while there has been change, a significant degree of continuity remains in the traditional gender-based division of labor within households (Kowalewska & Vitali, 2021). On the parenting front within heterosexual relationships, there has been a notable evolution in the expectations and perceptions surrounding fatherhood and masculinity. Recent discourse suggests that the concept of masculinity has broadened to include more nurturing roles, moving away from traditional, hegemonic ideals towards what is being referred to as 'caring masculinity' (Elliott, 2016). This development has sparked a surge in research focusing on the increased involvement of fathers in parenting and its implications for understanding masculinity, highlighting a societal shift from a more hegemonic form of masculinity (Connell, 1987) towards valuing more emotionally involved and caring forms of masculinity (Elliott, 2016).

However, these shifts in work-family dynamics and masculinities are not uniform, and existing social and familial structures play a key role in shaping experiences amid these developments. For instance, the structure and dynamics of the family significantly shape an individual's choices, roles in society, and career paths (Itrat et al., 2007). In many cultures, people opt for living arrangements that include joint or extended families, where up to three generations coexist under one roof. In joint family setups, the household typically consists of adult males, spouses and children, parents, younger siblings, and sometimes their first cousins, nephews, and nieces. These families are characterized by shared living spaces, collective property and religious practices, a communal kitchen, and a network of reciprocal duties (Shah, 2024). Conversely, an extended family structure typically brings together multiple nuclear families in a single household, often consisting of brothers and their respective families residing together (Qureshi et al., 2014). This arrangement remains prevalent in Pakistan, challenging the assumption that modernisation would lead to a universal shift toward independent nuclear family units (Ali et al., 2021; Shah, 2023). Almost 63% of Pakistan's population resides in rural areas, where an extended family is a common living arrangement (World Bank, 2022).

Moreover, the prevailing understanding of masculinities, largely drawn from the experiences of SAHFs in Western nuclear family settings, emphasizes the negotiation of non-normative roles and the redefinition of masculine identity within the confines of a more individualistic family structure, and there is a lack of studies in more collectivist contexts like Pakistan (Ali et al., 2021; Shah, 2024). The integrated nature of the extended family system, based on collective economic survival and decision-making, a

gendered division of roles, and a strong communal ethos, provides a unique context for analyzing the renegotiation of masculine identities (Shah et al., 2020). Therefore, investigating the role of extended family in either reinforcing traditional masculine roles or supporting caring practices is crucial to understanding the complexity between communal pressures and individual agency. Thus, this study not only contributes to a nuanced understanding of masculinities in non-Western, communal settings but also challenges and expands the current discourse on gender roles, caregiving, and the redefinition of masculinity in the face of changing familial structures (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Shah & Shah, 2024). The key guiding question for this study is: How do SAHFs experience and negotiate their fathering role in the context of the extended family system in Pakistan? And whether SAHFs embrace values of care or renegotiate their masculine identities in response to societal expectations and familial pressures.

Masculinities and SAHFs

Understanding the experiences of SAHFs requires a thorough examination of prevailing concepts of masculinity. Preliminary work in this regard was conducted by Connell (1987), who noted that hegemonic masculinity, the most celebrated and sought-after model of manliness, establishes distinct roles for men and women while promoting a patriarchal societal structure. This ideal of masculinity is seen as the epitome of what it means to be a man, influencing societal expectations and perceptions of male identity (Connell, 2003). It essentially acts as a benchmark for masculine behavior, overshadowing and marginalizing other forms of masculinity and femininity (Connell, 1987). The archetypal hegemonic male is often portrayed as strong, successful, unemotional, and authoritative (Connell, 2003). Although many men may not embody this ideal fully, they recognize its prevalence and contribute to its perpetuation, benefiting from the systemic subjugation of women and other men who deviate from this norm (Connell, 2000). Similarly, although not all men achieve the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, most men find themselves perpetually measuring up to and navigating the pressures of hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), living in a constant state of negotiation with its ideals and expectations (Plantin et al., 2003).

Hegemonic masculinity permeates all areas of men's lives, with its influence being notably significant in shaping notions of fatherhood. It defines societal norms around what is expected of fathers and the characteristics of a good father. Traditionally, this dominant form of masculinity has portrayed fathers as authoritarian, uninvolved, emotionally detached, and often physically absent (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015). A key aspect of hegemonic masculinity is the expectation that fathers serve as the primary financial providers, thereby basing their paternal identities on their capacity to earn and financially contribute (Haas & Hwang, 2008). Such an expectation elevates fathers to a position of dominance within the traditional framework of a heterosexual nuclear

family, reinforcing conventional perceptions of fatherhood as tied to status, power, and authority (Brandth & Kvande, 1998).

Caring Masculinities

Reflecting on Connell's (1987) notion that masculinity manifests in various forms, there has been an increased focus on feminist interpretations of masculinities in recent times. Elliott (2016) introduced the concept of caring masculinities, which diverge from traditional masculine traits, such as dominance, by advocating for nurturing values and the importance of mutually dependent relationships. Elliott's work on caring masculinities is influenced by Hanlon's (2012) work, which demonstrated that masculinities, values of care, and emotions are intertwined. Hanlon identified several factors that contribute to men's involvement in care work, including their acknowledgement and appreciation of care work, expressions of vulnerability, and flexible definitions of care work. Building on these arguments, Elliott developed her framework, arguing that involvement in care work helps men to develop forms of caring masculinities and nurturing identities.

Three broader characteristics indicate the adoption of caring masculinities (Elliott, 2016). These include rejection of domination, which helps reduce existing inequalities in the relationship and can encourage men to give up on more hostile norms of domination and violence to instead adopt more caring values. Secondly, emphasising the emotional, relational, and interdependent qualities of care helps create a distinction between traditional hegemonic masculinities and more caring masculinities. Thirdly, reshaping traditional masculinity values that consider men as heads of the household, protectors, and breadwinners to more relational and care-oriented values. For instance, men often take on the responsibility of caregiving or homemaking, in addition to, or instead of, their breadwinning role in their couple relationship. This way, caring masculinities introduce relational and caregiving qualities to traditional masculinities, helping men who exhibit caring masculinities to establish new understandings and meanings.

Caring masculinities challenge traditional notions of masculinity and determine caring roles as neither inherently male nor female, thus making SAHFs a relevant group to examine changes in masculine identities with the adoption of caregiving roles. Various reasons, including issues in balancing work-family responsibilities, job loss, unemployment or underemployment, or a strong inclination towards being the primary caregiver, may motivate SAHFs to adopt caring masculinities (Chesley, 2011). Studies also show that SAHFs' involvement in caregiving roles facilitates their adoption of caring masculinities (e.g., Lee & Lee, 2018). However, regardless of the specific reasons for adopting caregiving responsibilities, men's involvement in these roles can contribute new perspectives and viewpoints to the dynamic relationship between care and masculinity (Doucet, 2004). By adopting caregiving roles, SAHFs navigate and redefine traditional masculine norms, which sets them apart from masculine characteristics associated with employed fathers (Fischer & Anderson, 2012).

However, there are opposing views as well, and some researchers argue that it is an oversimplification to assert that these fathers completely disavow traditional masculinity norms and fully embrace caring masculinities (Hunter et al., 2017; Shah, 2024). For instance, Rochlen et al. (2008) found that SAHFs simultaneously engaged in adhering to and rejecting traditional masculinities. This is viewed as a negotiation, tension, and complexity of masculinity that fathers experience as they negotiate their paternal identity with changing notions of masculinity (Hunter et al., 2017; Rochlen et al., 2008). Positioned at the crossroads of conventional and evolving notions of masculinity and fatherhood, it is understandable that these fathers exhibit diverse and sometimes conflicting masculine traits. Nevertheless, the impact of these multifaceted forms of masculinity on SAHFs' roles within the extended family setup, particularly in strongly patriarchal societies, remains largely unexplored and warrants further inquiry.

Methods

I conducted this study using a qualitative phenomenological approach, a method suited for exploring the lived experiences and subjective interpretations of individuals, aligning with the study's goal to uncover how SAHFs perceive, internalize, and negotiate societal expectations of masculinity and family honor in an extended family context (Flasch et al., 2017; Husserl, 1970). Rooted in the philosophical work of Husserl (1970; 2014) and later expanded by Van Manen (2023) and others, phenomenology seeks not to explain or predict phenomena but to understand how people experience and interpret them and therefore, it was useful in this study in capturing the nuanced, often internalized struggles that SAHFs face as they navigate conflicting expectations around masculinity, honor, and caregiving. Similarly, this approach also allowed the analysis to emerge inductively from the participants' own words and emotional expressions, thus maintaining a deep connection to their subjective realities and the socio-cultural meanings they assign to their roles (Creswell, 2007).

Participants and Sampling Strategy

I recruited participants for this study from various areas of Islamabad, Pakistan's capital city, known for its diverse socio-cultural and ethnic demographics (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Urban residents comprise 66% of this total, with rural residents accounting for the remainder. The extended family structure is prevalent in both urban and rural areas of Islamabad. Participants for this study were recruited in various locations in Islamabad, including parks, playgrounds, and other relevant places, using purposive sampling strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I chose Islamabad as a location for participant recruitment due to its heterogeneous population, which allows for capturing diverse perspectives across levels of education, social class, and duration as an SAHF.

Additionally, my strong connections and relationships within the city facilitated the recruitment process and provided access to potential participants. My access to

potential participants was facilitated by utilizing personal networks and contacts, as well as leveraging social media platforms such as Facebook, LinkedIn, and WhatsApp groups. I employed purposive sampling to select respondents who matched specific criteria (e.g., being male, married, unemployed, or not part of the labor force for at least the preceding year, and living in an extended family arrangement). The study comprised twenty SAHFs, with half residing in Islamabad's urban areas, while the other half resided in rural areas. The number of children per respondent ranged from 1 to 5, and educational backgrounds varied widely, from no formal schooling to postgraduate degrees. Educational attainment was notably higher among urban participants, all of whom possessed at least a bachelor's degree. In contrast, rural participants displayed a varied educational background, with three lacking formal schooling, two completing primary education, two finishing higher secondary education, and the remainder holding bachelor's and master's degrees. The focus on SAHFs meant all participants were men aged 30 years or older. This diverse sample enabled comparisons across different social categories, enriching the study's insights into the SAHFs' experiences.

Interviews

The fieldwork duration was six months, during which I conducted in-depth interviews informed by phenomenological principles with SAHFs, using a semi-structured interview guide (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This approach is used to explore participants' lived experiences and the meanings they attach to their caregiving roles within the extended family system. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the possibility that participants may not be open about their experiences in the presence of others, individual interviews were the appropriate approach for conducting the study (Gaskell, 2000). The interview guide facilitated an open discussion with participants where not only their experiences were documented but also their demographic data and other relevant information such as their age, ethnicity, educational attainment, type of family, monthly family income, spouse's employment status, length of unemployment, and number of offspring were also gathered. The interview questions included (1) the personal journey into the SAHF role and how it began, (2) daily routines and responsibilities, (3) experiences with stigma, labelling, or support within the extended family and community, (4) perceptions of masculinity, fatherhood, and honor, (5) emotional and relational dynamics within the household, and (6) coping strategies and sources of resilience. I also used follow-up prompts to deepen reflection and clarify meaning. Moreover, the phenomenological approach enabled the study to identify core themes across narratives, such as internal conflict, stigma, resistance, and transformation, while preserving the depth and texture of individual voices. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, with each session averaging 45–90 minutes. This allowed participants to articulate their views thoroughly and introduce any relevant supplementary insights.

I encountered numerous challenges during the recruitment process of my study participants. In my study context, SAHFs were a group that often faced stigma and

adverse societal reactions, therefore making it difficult for me to approach, locate, and convince them for an interview. To deal with these challenges, I leveraged personal connections and key informants to identify and recruit participants. My purpose was to ensure a balanced representation of participants from both urban and rural areas. These personal contacts and key informants proved helpful and played a crucial role in identifying potential participants and introducing the study in a manner that helped build trust and encouraged voluntary participation in the interviews. I conducted interviews with participants at locations of their choice, with most interviews taking place in the participants' homes or local playgrounds. My initial observations from the field also revealed stronger adherence to traditional gender norms in rural areas, where SAHFs were viewed as deviating from these norms, exposing them to stronger adverse reactions and stigma. Therefore, finding participants from rural areas proved challenging as their roles are more heavily stigmatized, thereby extending the recruitment process. To ensure participation, I guaranteed their anonymity and the confidentiality of their contributions. They were assured that their actual names would not be used in the research, and instead, pseudonyms were used to protect their identities. I also paid particular attention to participants' emotional well-being and posed questions with cultural sensitivity, ensuring that respondents did not feel judged or pressured. Participants were reminded of their right to withdraw at any point and skip any questions they were uncomfortable answering. I obtained informed consent from all participants both verbally and in writing, and interviews were conducted in safe, private spaces to ensure their comfort and minimise the risk of social repercussions. I also maintained a reflexive approach throughout the study, reflecting on my positionality, power dynamics in the interview process, and how my gender and social identity may have influenced participants' responses.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data using the thematic analysis technique, adhering to the methodological framework suggested by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). This process entailed an initial immersion in the data, followed by coding, formulating preliminary themes from these codes, refining these themes, and finally defining and understanding the themes before compiling a comprehensive report of the findings. Data analysis commenced with extracting and cataloging codes from the first perusal of the interview transcripts, which I then scrutinized, with particular emphasis on those codes that resonated with extant literature. The coding procedure comprised two phases. The first phase involved generating deductive and inductive codes that captured the essence of the data, aligning with the study's questions and objectives ([Saldaña, 2021](#)). The subsequent phase facilitated the synthesis of these codes into conceptual and thematic clusters. The two-phased process helped formulate the overarching themes, which I further refined and assessed their congruence with prior research on the caregiving experiences of SAHFs.

Results

SAHFs Putting Family Honor (Ghairat) and Respect (Izzat) in Question?

My data indicate that in the extended family context of Pakistan, the notions of family honor (ghairat) and respect (izzat) were deeply ingrained in the societal fabric and considered pivotal aspects of the family's social standing and communal reputation. *Ghairat* and *Izzat* are Urdu translations of the terms honor and respect. This notion of honor is not just an individual attribute but a collective family virtue, where each family member's actions are seen as reflective of the family's moral and ethical standing (Rodriguez Mosquera & Imada, 2013). The family code of honor is a set of unspoken but widely understood norms and expectations that govern behavior, particularly regarding gender roles and social interactions among family members. For instance, women are often expected to embody modesty, chastity, and obedience, serving as custodians of the family's honor through their conduct. On the other hand, men are expected to be the protectors and providers for their families, ensuring their economic stability and social respectability (Shah, 2023). When these traditional roles are not adhered to, it is perceived as a deviation from the family honor code, potentially bringing shame and dishonor to the family.

In this context, SAHFs were viewed as challenging the traditional gender roles prescribed by the family honor code. This was evident in most of my participants' interview accounts. For instance, Faizan, an SAHF, shared his experiences in this regard.

When I started staying home, everyone didn't like it.... They began questioning my manhood, saying I was setting a bad example. My family says we feel embarrassed explaining your situation to others. They think I am bringing a bad name to the family.

Moreover, in the typical rural extended family setup, where multiple generations live under one roof, daily interactions and communal living arrangements amplify not only the scrutiny of individual behaviors but also the expectation that all members maintain the honorable title of the family. This scrutiny is not limited to idle gossip but can have tangible consequences, such as reduced social invitations for the family, hesitance in forming marital alliances, and a general sense of disapproval within the community for the whole family.

Irfan, who was a SAHF and was living with his wife, two children, and an extended family of 15 other members, shared his experience of familial and societal responses towards him:

Living in an extended family means you are always under the microscope. The shift in people's perception towards me was immediate. At first, there were just whispers, but then they grew louder, discussing my inability to 'be a man' to have no ghairat (honor) and izzat (respect). They also think I have endangered the honor and respect of the family. My father

and uncles continuously tell me that tum nay hamain sharminda krdia hay poray muhallay k samny (you have embarrassed us in front of the whole community).

Similarly, another participant, named Ahmed, stated:

My family is unhappy about my wife's job. They say that Ghairat mand gharon k mard ghar baith k rotain ni thortay na unke awratain ghar say bahir kamany jaate hay (Men of honorable households do not sit at home breaking bread, nor do their women go out to earn a living).

The data further shows that the pressure to conform to these traditional roles is immense, with family elders often playing a key role in enforcing the code of honor. They exerted pressure on the SAHFs to seek employment and reassume the traditional provider role, often using religious, cultural, and societal justifications. The family's fear of losing face or status within their community was a powerful motivator for adherence to traditional roles, making the experience of being a SAHF in this context more challenging and fraught with social repercussions.

Zeeshan, a SAHF, narrated his experience in this regard:

A few days back, I overheard my uncle talking to my grandfather in our home about me, saying, 'Look at him, living on his wife's earnings'. His father has made sacrifices, he did everything in his capacity to educate and raise him. But for what? For this day to be staying home. He has destroyed our family's honor and respect. He should stop his wife from working. Otherwise, hamary ghar ke rahe sahe izzat b mitte may mil jayege (The remaining respect of our family will be lost in the dust).

These interview extracts from SAHFs reveal the profound societal pressure and the complex dynamics of family honor that impact their lives and decisions. Participants' journeys into becoming SAHFs, mostly out of economic necessity and the extended family and community responses towards them, highlight the societal equating of masculinity with economic provision. The questioning and disapproval of their masculinities show adherence to rigid gender norms that form the basis for family honor. These societal pressures are directed not only towards the individuals but also negatively affect the social image and reputation of the entire family. In this situation, SAHFs are perceived as responsible for bringing a bad name to the family, resulting in their continuous experiences with criticism and negative reactions not only from the surrounding community but also from their extended family members.

Signs of Embracing Caring Masculinities?

A pertinent question for this study was whether SAHFs embrace values of care, given their caregiving roles, or resort to more hegemonic notions of masculinity. My data

shows that the duration of being an SAHF, the levels of education, and social support emerged as crucial factors in determining their alignment with or deviation from conventional masculinity norms within the context of the extended family. The findings reveal that, due to severe criticism and stigma for their non-traditional role, a majority of SAHFs tended to lean towards more hegemonic masculine values. For instance, Abid, 36, shared his views in this regard:

Each day, people in my surroundings make it clear that what I am doing is wrong. I hear comments like a *ghairat mand aadmi* (honorable man) doesn't just stay at home, instead, he works outside and earns for his wife and children. I think they are right in this. May b yahe sochta hon kay aik mard ke pehchan usky bank balance and kamaye sy hote hy (I also think a man's identity is determined by his bank balance and earnings). I feel that I am not doing well by staying home, and I am also not being lazy about it. I am actively seeking jobs. Sooner or later, I will be the breadwinner. I don't want to be known as someone who relies on his wife's money; I want to earn my own and spend it on my family.

Abid's response encapsulates the intense societal pressure faced by men who were in the SAHF role and perceived as deviating from traditional gender roles, particularly in the extended family contexts where masculinity is closely tied to economic provision. The reference to a *Ghairat Mand Aadmi* (honorable man) not being confined to domestic spaces but rather earning for his family reinforces traditional conceptions of honor and masculinity that equate a man's worth with his ability to generate income. Abid's internalization of these societal norms is evident in his agreement with the sentiment that a man's identity is linked to his financial contributions, reflecting a broader cultural understanding of masculinity, where financial success and independence are seen as core components of male identity (Connell, 2000). This extract also reveals a crucial personal conflict where, on the one hand, the participant recognizes the value of his role within the home, but he also cannot fully escape the societal judgment that comes with stepping outside traditional gender roles. His active job search and the expressed desire not to be seen as *relying on his wife's money* highlight an internalization of hegemonic norms that devalue domestic roles and caregiving as less masculine or unworthy pursuits for men.

Likewise, for most of these participants, resorting to more hegemonic notions of masculinity was a normalization and compensation strategy for the loss of masculine honor due to their SAHF role. To cope with negative responses from the extended family and surrounding community, these fathers increased their participation in more traditionally masculine tasks, such as repair work, bringing home groceries, managing their female partner's earnings, and occasionally keeping their ATM card. Similarly, they avoided participating in household activities such as doing dishes, cleaning, caring for children, and other domestic tasks. Some also resorted to aggressive behavior to keep the illusion of control over their wives and children within the extended family. They stated that it sometimes becomes normal to be aggressive to maintain order and

control within the household. When I asked Ahmed about his contribution to the household tasks, he replied:

To be honest, I don't do the dishes, nor I can clean. I just don't know how to do it ... and I haven't done it before as well. I also can't cook, and you know, Mard kitchen may kaam karty nahe ache lagtay (Men don't look good working in the kitchen). S ... these things are no go for me, but I do stuff. It's not like I'm completely stuck at home. I do groceries, sometimes I take my children to school, also I do all the hard things, you know ... the repair work, the decision making, and keeping order in the family.

When I asked him how he keeps order in the family, he responded by saying, "I am short-tempered, *chote bataon pay maira dimagh ghoom jata hay* (My mind gets overwhelmed over small matters). Everyone in my family knows that, so they stay careful."

However, not all SAHFs adhered to the notions of hegemonic masculinity, and a subset of fathers strived to keep a balance between traditional masculine ideals and caring masculinities. These were mainly fathers from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds, but with comparatively higher education levels. Their duration as SAHF also varied, spanning both long and short periods. For instance, when asked about the reconciliation strategies with his SAHF role and traditional masculine expectations from his extended family and community, Kamran, who was a bachelor's degree holder and in the SAHF role for the last three years, narrated:

I want to embrace my fathering and caregiving role, but my family and community are not letting me do it. I have tried to help my wife in the kitchen and take care of the children, but my own family then started making fun of me. You know I was called Joru Ka Ghulam (wife's slave) and Zan Mureed (A Persian-derived phrase used in Urdu language, with Zan meaning woman and Mureed implying a follower or simply meaning follower of the woman). I then stopped entering the kitchen. But I try to help my wife and take care of my children when I am with them. I don't want to be seen or judged negatively by others.

The situation narrated by Kamran portrays the struggles and challenges an individual encounters while navigating his SAHF role in a societal and familial context that prioritizes the gendered division of roles. Although his willingness to embrace fathering and caregiving is a sign of change towards more involved fathering, this is also in direct confrontation with prevalent gender norms, which expect men to be in provider roles. This also reflects the internal conflict men may experience, especially those who are willing to fully engage in caregiving roles but are also worried about negative societal reactions. These men remain stuck between notions of traditional and caring masculinities.

Moreover, there was a small group of fathers who not only challenged traditional masculinity norms but also strived to fully adopt their caregiving roles. They had also changed their views regarding caregiving and adopted more nurturing and caring

values. These were four individuals who had completely settled into their SAHF roles, shunning hegemonic masculinity in favor of nurturing and caring values, as evident in their interviews. Among them, two were highly educated, belonged to the upper social strata of society, and had supportive extended family members. Having no formal education, the other two had been SAHFs for an extended period and came from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The motivations for rejecting conventional masculinity differed markedly between the educated and uneducated fathers.

Shahid, who had a master's degree and was in the SAHF role for three years, expressed his opinion in this regard:

I don't believe in subordinating or controlling women. This is a Stone Age mindset. I know people in my family and community think I am crazy, but I don't care. I know what is good for me and my family, and I am doing that accordingly. In the beginning, it was difficult as I was reactive towards any negative remarks, but then I learned to cope with them. My family helped me with this, especially my elder brother, who told me it's your decision and that you will have all our support. This was a great support.... I also improved my homemaking skills with the help of my wife and sister-in-law. I am happy that my wife has a good job, and I believe women should be given full support if they are working.

Shahid's journey embodies a significant departure from traditional gender norms and understandings of masculinity within a context that emphasizes adherence to hegemonic notions of masculinity for men. Support from his extended family, underscored by Shahid's efforts to enhance his domestic capabilities with assistance from his wife and sister-in-law, demonstrates a transformative process that facilitated his adoption of care values. This also highlights the importance of a supportive network in challenging and eventually transforming societal norms.

Moreover, for participants with less education, who also belonged to the lower social strata, their long-term involvement in caregiving roles, with reduced prospects of reassuming the role of primary breadwinner, was a major reason for rejecting traditional notions of masculinity. Salman shared his experiences in this regard:

I have been staying home for almost seven years now. My eldest was two, and my youngest was just a year old when I became unemployed and started staying home. I did explore job opportunities, but nothing came my way. Then I gave up on my search and told my wife, 'You earn the money; I will take care of the household.' She was uneasy about this situation; she hoped I would find work, but I continued to stay home. But now, after nearly seven years, this lifestyle has become my new normal. I spend time with my kids and watch them grow. I do homemaking, including everything from cooking and cleaning to grocery shopping. People no longer bother me much, and I no longer care what others say or think about me.

This change from traditional to caring masculinities among a few SAHFs in the context of an extended family in Pakistan is notable for several reasons. First, it

demonstrates the individual's agency and resilience in the face of societal and familial pressures. Second, it highlights the potential for change in societal norms and perceptions of masculinity, even within rigid patriarchal structures. The SAHF's narrative suggests that an extended period of engagement in caregiving can lead to a reevaluation of masculine identity, shifting away from traditional patriarchal norms toward a more inclusive understanding of masculinity that values emotional and domestic contributions (Elliott, 2016). Similarly, it also suggests the importance of support networks, especially from extended family, that can facilitate the adoption of caring masculinities. The transition to caring masculinities within the extended family context of Pakistan not only challenges existing gender norms but also opens possibilities for more equitable gender relations. However, the extent to which such individual transformations can lead to broader societal change remains a critical area for further exploration.

Navigating Stigma, Shame, and Guilt

Most SAHFs in this study have experienced negative labelling, name-calling, and stigmatization from their extended families and surrounding communities. These fathers stated that their non-participation in the workforce is viewed as personal failings rather than acknowledging the broader socio-economic conditions that have led to their role as primary caregivers. Most of these fathers adopted the caregiving roles due to unemployment, insufficient employment skills, the female partner's favorable job prospects, or health issues that limited their ability to work. However, these men were mostly labelled as indolent or overly reliant on their wife's income, who were viewed as not only violating the gender normative order but also bringing shame to their families. For instance, Zeeshan shared his views in this regard:

In our society, a man's honor, dignity, and masculinity are closely intertwined with his financial status and contributions. A person could have great wisdom and intellect, but if they don't earn money and stay at home, they have no respect or worth in the community, not even within their own family, let alone the community.

Similarly, these fathers were viewed as *Susat*, and *had haram* (lazy), *Bivi k paiso pay palny wala* (Surviving on their wife's income), *Joru Ka Ghulam* and *Zan Mureed*. This was reflected in the interview account of Rameez, who had held the SAHF role for the last three years.

My siblings and parents disrespect me for staying at home. Everyone thinks this is a Gunah (sin), that I am not working, and my wife is the breadwinner. I am named and blamed all day, every time, by everyone. A few days back, my younger brother said in front of me, *Bivi ke kamaye pay palny waly ke kon izzat krayga bhala* (who will respect a person who survives on his wife's income). That was an embarrassing moment for me and led to a fight between us.

The notion that Rameez's role as a SAHF is seen as a *Gunah* (Sin) illustrates the moral judgment cast upon him. Being disrespected by his own family and labelled as *Susat* and *Bivi k paiso pay palny wala* further reflects a pervasive cultural disdain for men who do not conform to traditional breadwinner roles and the stigmatization and devaluation they experience. Imbued with negative connotations, these terms used by people in their surroundings signify not just a departure from expected gender norms but are perceived as undermining the very essence of masculine honor.

Along with negative labelling and stigma, there were intense feelings of shame and guilt experienced by these SAHFs. For instance, Faizan narrated his experience in this regard:

This, of course, is a situation that brings a great deal of shame and guilt. My father worked tirelessly to provide for us, and here I am, at home, not doing what's expected of me. The guilt is sometimes overwhelming, knowing that despite my best intentions and efforts for my family, I am seen as stepping away from our cultural norms and being perceived as dishonoring the legacy of the men in my family.

Similarly, for some of the participants, being SAHF was a good opportunity to spend more time with their children, but they also experienced, in parallel, the guilt attached to their caregiving role. For instance, Abid, a SAHF, shared his experience in this context:

There is pride and a sense of comfort that I get to spend a lot of time with my children, but there is a sense of shame and guilt as well. I don't think I'm a good role model for my children. I admire my father for doing a lot for me. What will my children think of me? A father who did nothing for them? Who just stayed home?

The simultaneous experiences of fulfilment and guilt among SAHFs suggest that, while there are instances of acceptance for diverse family structures and roles, deeply ingrained cultural and social norms still exert a powerful influence on individual identities and familial interactions (Shah, 2024). The shame and guilt experienced are not merely a personal struggle but are often reinforced by external cues, from direct comments by relatives and acquaintances to subtler societal messages suggesting that caregiving is less valuable or dignified than professional success. This also reflects severe challenges in rejecting hegemonic masculinities and adopting nurturing and caring values.

Discussion

This study delves into the relatively unexplored domain of SAHFs in the extended family settings of Pakistan, a context deeply rooted in traditional gender roles and expectations. The extended family context in rural areas of Pakistan presents a unique situation for analyzing the experiences of SAHFs and their negotiation of their masculine identities. This is a context characterized by highly gendered division of

roles, a close-knit community system, multiple generations living together, sharing of economic and household responsibilities, and severe negative responses towards violation of gendered behaviors. The study findings show that these SAHFs face severe stigmatization, criticism, and negative societal responses, mostly from their extended family and surrounding community. These fathers are labelled as *Joru Ka Ghulam* (wife's slave), *Zan Mureed* (woman's follower), *Susat* (lazy), and *Bivi k paiso pay palny wala* (Surviving on wife's income). In the socio-cultural context of Pakistan, these terms are colloquially used to derogatorily describe a man perceived as being excessively subservient or obedient to his wife or the women in his family. These terms are also wielded as tools of social control, discouraging deviation from traditional roles through public shaming and ostracization (Salam, 2021). These results are valuable contributions to our understanding of how individual choices are shaped, judged, and responded to by their extended families in collectivist societies, such as Pakistan, which place immense emphasis on these connections and embed them within the core of individual social standing and identity. This is contrary to the practices within more individualistic Western societies, where relationships with extended families are often secondary or voluntary, with little to no significant impact on individual decisions and choices (Shah, 2024).

This contrast extends to the concept of masculinity, where, in Western contexts, the transition to caregiving roles has been examined primarily through the lens of personal identity and the redefinition of masculinity (Hunter et al., 2017). However, this study's findings suggest that in the Pakistani context, the challenge to masculine identity is compounded by the collective dimension of honor, making the experience of SAHFs markedly more complex and fraught with societal hurdles. Furthermore, this scenario reveals the hierarchical nature of values within these communities, where collective ideals of honor and reputation supersede individual growth, choices, and genuine fulfilment derived from caregiving (Baker et al., 2009). The rigid demarcation of gender roles serves as a bulwark against the perceived erosion of social cohesion and identity, with any deviation from these roles potentially leading to social ostracization. Therefore, the conflict experienced by SAHFs, who were caught between the responsibility of caregiving and the pressure to conform to societal expectations of masculinity, highlights the complex negotiation of identity within the framework of family honor (Mayeda & Vijaykumar, 2016). These results not only add depth to our understanding of gender roles and family dynamics in non-Western contexts but also highlight the cultural specificity of the challenges SAHFs face.

Furthermore, the study offers a unique perspective on the concept of family honor or respect within the Pakistani context, where the maintenance of honor has traditionally been associated with the behavior and character of women (Jafri, 2008). Within this cultural framework, women are primarily burdened with upholding family honor through adherence to societal norms that define the roles of a 'good' woman. Deviation from these norms not only affects a woman's reputation but also tarnishes the family and community's standing (Baxi et al., 2006). The notion that community honor resides within a woman's body underscores a patriarchal control mechanism, where a woman

exercising autonomy is viewed as a breach of honor, indicating male guardians' failure to control her (Baker et al., 2009). This patriarchal stance paves the way for justifying extreme retaliations, including honor crimes and killings, to 'redeem' lost honor (Mayeda & Vijaykumar, 2016). However, results from this study shed light on a departure from the traditional attribution of honor solely to women's conduct and reveal that, within the context of SAHFs, the male couple partner becomes a focal point for criticism regarding the erosion of the family's honor. While this shift does not signify a reduction in holding women accountable for upholding family honor or their susceptibility to honor-based violence, it highlights the emphasis placed on preserving the family's honor in collectivist societies, such as within the extended family context in Pakistan (Qureshi et al., 2014). This emphasis transcends gender boundaries, highlighting that despite men benefiting from patriarchal privileges, endangering the family's social image through involvement in non-traditional roles not only deprives them of these privileges but also subjects them to intense criticism, stigma, loss of social status, and a downgrading to marginalize masculine identity. This dynamic illustrates the complex interplay between gender roles, family honor, and societal expectations. It reveals that while traditionally attributed to women, the responsibility for maintaining family honor increasingly involves men, especially when they step outside normative boundaries (Shah, 2024).

The study further expands our understanding of existing masculinity theories, including caring masculinities and hegemonic masculinity. For instance, caring masculinities theory posits that men's engagement in caregiving and domestic responsibilities can challenge traditional notions of masculinity by embracing values such as nurturance, empathy, and emotional connectivity (Elliott, 2016; Hanlon, 2012). However, results from this study indicate a more nuanced reality, suggesting that the transition towards caring masculinities is not as straightforward as the theory might predict. This study demonstrates that although the extended family context with an emphasize on adhering to the family code of honor is a critical sight for practice and reinforcement of hegemonic masculinities, SAHFs in this setting navigated their challenged masculine identities in three distinct manners, influenced by a myriad of factors such as duration in the SAHF role, social class, and educational background. Firstly, most of the SAHFs, particularly those within the first five years of assuming their role and predominantly from middle to lower social classes and less education, gravitate towards reinforcing hegemonic masculine values. This inclination was driven by severe societal criticism and the stigma attached to their non-traditional role. These men made references to the concept of *Ghairat Mand Aadmi* (honorable man) who is not confined to domestic spaces but rather earning for his family, reinforcing traditional conceptions of honor and masculinity that equate a man's worth with his ability to generate income (Baker et al., 2009; Mayeda & Vijaykumar, 2016). They were also active job seekers and expressed a desire not to be seen as *relying on their wives' money*, highlighting the internalization of hegemonic masculine norms that devalue domestic roles and caregiving as less masculine or unworthy pursuits for men (Connell, 2003). Similarly, this aligns with hegemonic masculinity norms, which reinforce the idea that

true masculinity is associated with the public sphere and work, while femininity is relegated to the private sphere of the home and caregiving (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Hunter et al., 2017). For most of these participants, resorting to more hegemonic notions of masculinity was also a normalization and compensation strategy for the loss of masculine honor due to their SAHF role. These fathers not only increased their participation in more traditionally masculine tasks, but they also reported occasionally exhibiting aggressive behavior to maintain an illusion of control within their households.

Second, a subset of SAHFs, who were mainly from middle to upper-social-class backgrounds with higher levels of education, attempted to balance traditional masculine ideals with caring masculinities. These fathers faced an internal conflict between the desire to be more involved in caregiving and the fear of societal judgment, representing a transitional stance where they were caught between hegemonic expectations and a more nurturing approach to fatherhood. Thirdly, a smaller number of fathers challenged traditional masculinity norms and strived to fully adopt their caregiving roles while rejecting traditional norms in favor of nurturing and caring values (Elliott, 2016). This group consisted of four individuals: two highly educated individuals from the upper social stratum and two with no formal education from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds of these participants demonstrate that the rejection of traditional masculinity transcends economic and educational barriers. This diversity also suggests that while education may provide the understanding necessary for questioning societal norms, intrinsic value systems and personal experiences can also propel individuals towards embracing caring masculinities, regardless of their socio-economic status. Support from extended family members emerged as a key factor facilitating the acceptance and adaptation to the SAHF role, highlighting the transformative power of a supportive network in challenging societal norms (Itrat et al., 2007). This finding is significant because it illustrates that societal change toward more inclusive understandings of gender roles is not solely contingent on broader societal acceptance but can also be initiated and sustained within the microcosm of the family (Cohen, 2011). These results also highlight the complexities of navigating masculinity within a cultural context that highly values family honor and traditional gender roles (Mumtaz & Salway, 2009).

These findings further contribute to the discourse on caring masculinities by exploring that involvement in caregiving does not uniformly lead men to adopt caring masculinities (Elliott, 2016). Instead, a complex interplay of factors influences men's navigation and embodiment of masculine identities in caregiving roles. The study delineates how the availability of a support system, educational background, family structure, and social class background play crucial roles in shaping men's responses to caregiving. These factors can lead to a spectrum of outcomes, from the rejection of hegemonic dominance and the embrace of nurturing and caring values to the reinforcement of traditional hegemonic masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Latshaw & Hale, 2016). This complexity adds depth to the concept of caring masculinities by demonstrating that a confluence of personal, social, and cultural factors

influences men's engagement with caregiving and domestic roles. This complexity further underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of masculinities that takes into account the cultural and contextual specificities of different societies. The dominant Western perspectives on masculinities often overlook the intricacies of the global South, where extended family and community systems significantly influence individual behaviors and societal norms (Shah, 2023).

Conclusion

This study explores the lived experiences of SAHFs in Pakistan's extended family contexts, revealing the profound social, emotional, and identity-based challenges men face when they step outside traditional gender roles. Given the social context where masculinity is closely tied to breadwinning, public visibility, and the upholding of family honor, SAHFs are subject to intense stigma, shame, and marginalization. Findings from this study demonstrate that the performance of masculinity is not static but actively negotiated within complex social frameworks shaped by class, education, familial expectations, and cultural ideals, where some men reinforce hegemonic norms as a coping strategy, others, particularly those with supportive networks, navigate more flexible and caring masculine identities. Results, therefore, illustrate the cultural specificity of caregiving roles in patriarchal and collectivist societies like Pakistan and call for a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of gender roles, one that recognizes how honor, masculinity, and caregiving intersect in non-Western settings. By foregrounding and exploring the experiences of SAHFs, this research contributes to broader discussions on gender justice, family dynamics, and the reconfiguration of masculinities in the Global South, emphasizing the need for cultural sensitivity in both theory and policy interventions.

Results from the study also highlight the importance of micro-level familial and community dynamics in both reinforcing and challenging patriarchal norms by showing that masculinity is not passively disrupted but actively re-negotiated in response to stigma. Moreover, insights from this study can inform culturally grounded policies and interventions that support more inclusive and flexible gender roles, particularly in societies where the extended family plays a central role in defining masculine respectability. These insights are also beneficial for practitioners working in family counseling, gender advocacy, and social policy who can draw on these findings to design context-specific programs that support men's involvement in caregiving while addressing the structural stigma attached to non-normative masculinities. However, besides its multidimensional contributions, this study has a few limitations, including its limited geographical and demographic scope, reliance on self-reported narratives, and its focus primarily on the male partner's experiences. Therefore, future studies could expand the sample across diverse contexts, including female partners' narratives, and explore the long-term trajectories of SAHFs to build on the foundations laid by this study.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Institute of Sociology at Goethe University Frankfurt for providing the academic environment to conduct this research. I also thank the participants of this study for generously sharing their time and insights, which made this work possible. Additionally, as a non-native English speaker, I used the OpenAI tool, ChatGPT version 4o, to enhance the language clarity and grammar of my manuscript. It was employed solely for language improvement, and the study's content, concepts, arguments, and analyses remain entirely my own. All referenced literature is properly cited and acknowledged. Following the use of ChatGPT, I carefully reviewed and edited the manuscript to ensure it accurately represents my research and findings.

Author Contributions

Rahat Shah conceptualized the study, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethical Statements

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Institute of Sociology, Goethe University Frankfurt. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for research involving human participants.

Informed Consent

All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study. Written consent was obtained for participation and publication where applicable. Participants provided explicit written consent for the publication of anonymized data and findings derived from this study.

ORCID iD

Rahat Shah  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3856-9900>

Data Availability Statement

The data analyzed during this study are not publicly available to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the participants but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request and with appropriate ethical approvals.

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Author Biography

Rahat Shah is a researcher at the Institute of Sociology, Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany. His research focuses on issues related to family, youth, gender, and labor market inequalities in South Asia, with a specific focus on Pakistan.