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Navigating non-normative roles: Experiences of female-breadwinning couples in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the experiences of female-breadwinning couples (FBCs) in Pakistan. Using the constructivist grounded theory approach, a sample of twenty participants (10 male and 10 females) was interviewed. The study findings show that FBCs experience social stigmatisation, social isolation and differential treatment. These couples are viewed as *abnormal*, *different* and *violators* of the normative gendered expectations. FBCs not only experience societal backlash, but their relationship dynamics are also negatively affected. To deal with societal responses and relationship problems, these couples adopt various *normalisation* strategies such as exercising discretion, relocation and performing gender identities. This study contributes to the literature by providing a culturally informed perspective on how deeply embedded gender norms shape interpersonal dynamics, normalisation strategies and overall experiences with non-normative roles. The study also suggests for a more explicit consideration of cultural and normative contexts to enrich the application of social psychological theories.

KEYWORDS
female-breadwinning couples, patriarchy, social stigmatisation, gender norms, grounded theory, Pakistan

1 | INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, men are expected to be capable enough to contribute financially to their families and bear all the household expenses. A family situation in which the female partner contributes and earns most, or the entire financial livelihood of the household, is known as a female-breadwinning couple (FBC) (Gaunt, 2013; Teachman, 2010). It is true that globally, men still occupy a significant proportion of the labour market and earn significantly more than women. However, a substantial proportion of women in developed parts of the world perform responsibilities as primary breadwinners for their families (Vitali & Arpino, 2016). An increase in female breadwinners has been observed around the globe (Akanle et al., 2018; Wooden & Hahn, 2014). For instance, across Europe, nearly 22% of households have a woman as their family's primary breadwinner, contributing 52% or more to annual household earnings (Klesment & Van Bavel, 2015).

Socioeconomic developments in rapidly industrialising and urbanising societies lead to the emergence of social facts that are incompatible with the patriarchal and socioeconomic structures of many countries and regions (Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe, 2014). Female breadwinning is one such emerging trend, with implications for the maintenance and stability of the family institution. This trend has spread more rapidly in industrialised regions such as Europe and the USA, where they have already established robust support structures to facilitate these transformations, including the creation of affinity groups and support networks for stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) (Medved, 2016). However, developing countries like Pakistan are ill-prepared for these changes, where the society still emphasises adherence to traditional

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gendered roles along with no such support networks and mechanisms available for couples in non-normative work–family arrangements. Due to challenging society's traditional, gendered basis, female breadwinning has implications for an increasing divorce ratio and family instability, specifically in highly patriarchal societies (Wooden & Hahn, 2014). This underlines the necessity for a thorough examination of the experiences of FBCs in such contexts. By investigating the experiences of these couples in Pakistan, this study offers valuable insights into the ways these dynamics are negotiated and how they affect the relationships and overall family dynamics. Furthermore, understanding these dynamics can offer critical insights into the societal fabric of countries like Pakistan, contributing to policymaking and the development of support structures.

Although several studies have been conducted on this topic in developed parts of the world (e.g., Chesley, 2017; Jurczyk et al., 2019; Medved, 2016), more understanding is required to evaluate the implications of female breadwinning for couples in this type of work–family arrangement and explore the societal responses towards them from a patriarchal, South Asian cultural context. This is significant because the family remains the sole buffer in developing countries like Pakistan, without any social security or welfare, which is then coupled with compromised state institutions and weak government (Gilligan et al., 2015). Female breadwinning also reflects the changing gender order in different societies, and research is thus needed from different cultural contexts to understand this phenomenon better (Dotti Sani, 2018). An increasing ratio of FBCs is a noteworthy sign of social change in Pakistani society (ILO, 2018). However, no academic literature is available on the experiences of these couples from the cultural context of Pakistan. I address this gap by answering the research question: How do FBCs experience and negotiate their atypical work–family arrangements in Pakistan?

1.1 | Theoretical framework: gender norms violation and its repercussions

The existing social-psychology literature sheds light on the multilayered repercussions of gender norm violations. A foundational contribution to this area of research is Madeline Heilman's 'Lack of Fit' model, which states that women in male-dominated roles often experience bias stemming from the stereotype that they are ill-suited for such positions (Heilman, 1983). This model further suggests that when someone's social identity (e.g., being a woman in a traditionally male-dominated field) does not fit the societal expectations or stereotypes associated with a particular role or task, that individual may be viewed as *less suitable* or *competent* for that task or role. This perception of 'lack of fit' feeds into Heilman's concept of 'backlash', which outlines the penalties women incur for displaying masculine traits, often being viewed as competent but unlikable (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007).

Studies have also shown *backlash* against both men and women who diverge from traditional prescriptive gender norms (Rudman et al., 2012). Specifically, women who succeed in roles traditionally dominated by men face greater criticism and reduced likability, while men in similar circumstances experience diminished respect (Heilman &Wallen, 2010; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Such negative judgments are not merely social; they also have implications in organisational settings, such as limiting career advancement opportunities and reduced rewards in their working roles (Heilman & Wallen, 2010). Moreover, men who engage in roles or professions traditionally considered 'feminine' often face various challenges, including social stigmatisation and exclusion (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). Vandello and Bosson (2008) add another layer to this discussion with their 'precarious manhood' theory, which posits that manhood is an unstable status that can be easily compromised by non-traditional behaviour. The theory further suggests that manhood must be continually earned through displays of culturally approved behaviours and avoiding those that are deemed feminine. By non-traditional behaviour, the theory implies attitudes, actions or roles, that are not typically associated with the traditional masculine stereotype in a given cultural context. Examples of such behaviour includes displaying emotional vulnerability, pursuing careers that are perceived as feminine or abstaining from competitive or aggressive behaviours. Engaging in such behaviours could threaten or compromise one's status as a 'real man' within the cultural context.

Similarly, Gaunt's (2013) research on caregiving dads and breadwinning moms' shared household responsibilities reveals the pervasiveness of gender role expectations. This study investigated the impact of gender ideologies on societal judgments of individuals who diverge from conventional gender norms. Participants in this study were tasked to evaluate a male or female individual based on their role as either the primary caregiver or primary breadwinner. The study found that both women and men faced judgment when deviating from traditional roles within the family from the study participants. However, participants with traditional views tended to give more favourable evaluations to people who conformed to prevalent gender norms compared with those who violated these norms.

While external factors like discrimination stemming from prescriptive gender norms often contribute to the challenges women and men encounter (Heilman & Eagly, 2008), internalisation of gender norms and stereotypes also play a key role in shaping individual behaviours and attitudes (Wood & Eagly, 2015). People's self-perceptions are often moulded by their social environment, leading women, for example, to view themselves as less effective leaders compared with men (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). Informed by society's gendered expectations, individuals develop self-concepts and identities that align with these gender norms (Eagly, 2018). Deviating from these norms – like pursuing an occupation that conflicts with one's gender can cause psychological distress and internal conflict (Witt & Wood, 2010). This internal conflict often serves as a driving force, motivating individuals to adjust their behaviours and preferences to fit the socially approved gender roles (Wood & Eagly, 2015).

Although existing literature mostly shows that women and men who deviate from gender norms are subject to negative evaluation and criticism, a few studies indicate that engagement in counter-normative roles can elicit praise and be viewed more positively. For instance, Lobel et al. (2001) found that men who contribute to household chores

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were viewed more positively, considered more likable, and people were more willing to engage with them, compared with men who participated less. Similarly, Deutsch and Saxon (1998) reported that men received more praise than women for participating in childcare, while women were praised for effectively combining family life and paid work. Along with that, Deutsch et al. (2003) also discovered that wives felt happier and more satisfied when their husbands were actively involved in childcare. These women also reported receiving more praise for their financial contributions and felt a greater appreciation from their husbands.

While these existing studies offer valuable perspectives on violations of gender norms and their consequences, most are rooted in Western cultural contexts. Therefore, it would be intriguing to examine how FBCs experience and negotiate their counter-normative work–family arrangements in a highly patriarchal cultural context.

1.2 | Response/coping with stigma and discrimination

Building on the insights into gender norm violation and its repercussions, this section elaborates existing literature on the strategies individuals employ to navigate and cope with the associated stigma and discrimination. The framework I present for understanding the handling of stigma, lack of fit and backlash takes its foundation from the convergence of two seminal theoretical perspectives: the stigma perspective (Crocker et al., 1987; Schmader et al., 2008; Barreto, 2014) and the social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The basis of the stigma perspective lies in the recognition of stigma as a stressor, a proposition with broad empirical support (Miller, 2006; Miller & Kaiser, 2001). Stigmatisation serves as a tool for upholding societal norms, such as the traditional role of mothers as caregivers and fathers as breadwinners, by subjecting those who deviate from these norms to various forms of adverse treatment, including derogatory comments, nonverbal cues, mockery and both overt and subtle discrimination (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001). Goffman's work on stigma looked at how social stigmatisation is deeply embedded within the social fabric and serves to limit and control individuals who do not conform to societal norms.

The intensity of the stigmatisation may vary depending on whether the individual consciously chose to adopt a marginalised status or was involuntarily placed in it, with less stigma generally attached to the latter (Boyce et al., 2007). People who belong to stigmatised groups are prone to 'stereotype threat' a psychological phenomenon where individuals internalise negative stereotypes or fear that they will be judged according to these stereotypes. This internalisation can lower their ambitions for certain roles and heighten their sense of being negatively evaluated (Spencer et al., 2016). Therefore, the stigmatised individuals are posited to regulate their responses to the stressor along dimensions of emotion, cognition, behaviour, physiology and environment, with coping efforts ranging from engagement (e.g., enhancing personal control, cognitive restructuring) to disengagement (e.g., avoidance of stressors) (Connor-Smith et al., 2000).

Furthermore, social identity theory (SIT) emphasises the significance of group membership and its implications for individual identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Within this framework, when individuals' identities are threatened, they may exhibit behaviours that either intensify group norms (Cadinu et al., 2003) or cause harm to out-group members (Tajfel, 1982). This theory also highlight that individuals might attempt to regain a positive self-image when their identity is threatened.

However, SIT predominantly focuses on responses to devalued social identities in broader contexts, a separate body of research delves into specific strategies individuals employ in response to stigmatisation stemming from norms violation (e.g., Derks et al., 2016; Faniko et al., 2017). The key strategies identified in these studies include 'hiding', 'displaying' and 'distancing'. The 'hiding' strategy, for example, entails individuals masking stigmatised aspects of their identity, such as LGBTQ+ affiliation or a history of mental health challenges, to avoid prejudice and discrimination (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). The 'displaying' strategy involves individuals accentuating attributes deemed desirable in specific contexts, as when ethnic minority employees foreground characteristics associated with the ethnic majority (Derks et al., 2015). In contrast, 'distancing' is characterised by individuals deliberately distancing themselves from a group that is negatively stereotyped (Derks et al., 2016). This can arise from the stress anticipated from negative stereotyping (Fiske, 2014) or as an attempt to bypass the adverse effects associated with a stigmatised identity. Overall, these theories offer a comprehensive lens to understand how FBCs in Pakistan experience and negotiate their counter-normative roles, interactions and constraints.

1.3 | Gender role (non)compliance and relationship outcome

Expanding on coping strategies amid stigma, this section examines how gender role (non)compliance affects relationship dynamics. Studies on the relationship between gender role ideologies and relationship satisfaction have shown mixed results. Some studies indicate that traditional gender role beliefs correlate positively with relationship satisfaction (Amato & Booth, 1995; Wilcox & Nock, 2006), while others argue that egalitarian views can lead to reduced marital satisfaction (Greenstein, 1995; Lye & Biblarz, 1993). For example, Greenstein (1995) in a US-based study found that employed women with non-traditional gender views experienced more stress and lower marital stability due to conflicts over household chores compared with their counterparts with traditional views who had fewer such conflicts. However, other studies suggest that couples with egalitarian gender ideologies experience higher marital satisfaction than those with traditional beliefs. For instance, another U.S.-based study found reduced satisfaction and increased conflicts in newly married African-American couples where the male partner held traditional gender views (Stanik & Bryant, 2012). Similar findings emerged from North Carolina among unemployed Mexican American women in traditionally oriented relationships (Hengstebeck et al., 2015). Studies in both the USA and Canada also found that traditional gender roles negatively impacted

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intimacy and satisfaction among Mexican American couples (Helms et al., 2019) and Chinese Canadian couples (Marshall, 2008).

Furthermore, previous research suggests that upholding traditional gender roles can negatively affect mental health, while egalitarian roles are associated with better well-being (Sweeting et al., 2014). For example, German couples with egalitarian beliefs reported higher subjective well-being and openness to non-traditional roles (Weiss et al., 2012). Similarly, in Israel, couples with egalitarian ideologies exhibited adaptive traits such as low anxiety, high self-esteem and higher marital satisfaction (Kulik, 2006). A study across five cultural groups in the Netherlands also found that egalitarian beliefs correlated with greater well-being for both genders (van de Vijver, 2007).

The quantitative research discussed here provides valuable insights into how deviating from traditional gender roles and norms impacts relationship outcomes but lacks depth in exploring the dynamics within relationships. On the other hand, qualitative studies offer nuanced insights into these dynamics and how cultural norms shape individual experiences in non-traditional roles. For example, Medved's (2009) study in the USA found that men with breadwinning female partners faced lower mental well-being, while the women struggled with increased mothering expectations and limited domestic support. Similarly, in Germany, Jurczyk et al. (2019) observed that women bearing dual roles of breadwinning and household duties felt strained and dissatisfied with their partners' lack of contribution to household tasks. These women also preferred handing over the breadwinning role to their male partners in the mid to short term. Additionally, Merla's (2008) study on SAHFs in Belgium shows that increased male involvement in childcare disrupts traditional views of masculinity, leading to consequences like decreased societal recognition and social isolation. These fathers employed various narratives and strategies to reconcile the tension between their individual identities and societal gender norms. These strategies appeared to be both complicit and transgressive with hegemonic definitions of masculinities.

Similarly, research primarily from the USA indicates that the division of tasks and mutual support within couples are crucial factors in shaping the experiences of SAHFs in non-traditional work–family arrangements (Lee & Lee, 2018; Rushing & Powell, 2015). These studies reveal that increased household and caregiving duties led to a shift in men's attitudes and masculine identities, fostering emotional connections and an appreciation for caregiving. While adopting roles that blend traditionally masculine and feminine traits, these men encountered challenges such as public ambivalence and social isolation. However, support from social networks – including partners and family – played a key role in overcoming these obstacles.

Chesley's (2011) US-based research indicated that non-traditional gender roles fostered a supportive partnership in couples due to increased male involvement in parenting and household chores. This increased involvement was perceived positively by many participants. However, the study also found that these non-traditional roles sometimes led to feelings of jealousy and stress. Such feelings were often rooted in partners comparing their contributions and roles within the household (e.g., perceived imbalances in chores or caregiving responsibilities), and in some cases, they arose from confronting societal expectations of their gender roles. Similarly, Meisenbach's (2010) phenomenological research highlighted that the experience of being a female breadwinner was two-fold for many women in the US. On one hand, the augmented responsibilities and societal perceptions associated with holding a counter-normative role led to feelings of stress, pressure and worry. On the other hand, when their male partners increased participation in household activities, these women felt empowered in their role as primary earners, leading to enhanced marital satisfaction.

The above literature clearly demonstrates how the research employing qualitative methodologies provides a more nuanced understanding of the processes not readily captured through quantitative measures. This underscores the imperative for further qualitative research to delve into the experiences of couples engaged in counter-normative work–family arrangements, particularly within cultural milieus like Pakistan, that have been underrepresented or overlooked in existing literature. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of gender role (non)compliance among FBCs and how it shapes their relationship dynamics and overall experiences within the cultural context of Pakistan, using qualitative methods.

1.4 | Institutional and cultural context of Pakistan

Pakistan is a former British colony, where Islam is the official state religion and most of its population adhering to the Muslim faith (Haub & Kaneda, 2014). The country is characterised by its conservative nature and deeply entrenched patriarchal system, which manifests itself in local cultural values and traditions that significantly shape gender relations and roles (Cohen, 2011). Patriarchal structures maintain their influence and authority over women's lives and choices by institutionalising the gendered segregation of spheres, and rigid gender norms, such as linking family honour to female virtue (Winkvist & Akhtar, 2000). The labour market in Pakistan is gender-segregated, primarily due to cultural norms and societal attitudes that prioritise male employment and see women's work as secondary. There is a striking difference in labour force participation rates between genders, with 82.7% of men actively involved in the workforce compared with only 22.2% of women (ILO, 2018). This gender disparity reflects the widespread preferential treatment of men's employment, while women's work is often seen as supplementary or undervalued.

One primary reason for women's attrition in employment sectors is the influence of family members in decision-making concerning women's career paths, marriages, education and other aspects of life (Asian Development Bank, 2016). Pakistani family culture is characterised by close-knit relationships, emphasising communal values and engagements. The extended family system, which involves women living with their husbands' family (i.e., their husband's siblings and parents), exemplifies the communal ethos intrinsic to Pakistani culture and family system (Mumtaz & Salway, 2009). The prevailing patriarchal system grants male family members (i.e., husbands, fathers, sons and brothers) the authority to determine women's mobility,

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subsequently influencing their access to career and education opportunities. Nonetheless, various social, historical, political, religious and regional factors, exacerbated by globalisation and colonialism, contribute to the perpetuation of restrictive gender norms and patriarchy in Pakistani society (Mohsin & Syed, 2020). Factors such as socio-economic status, residential location and ethnicity influence women's varying gendered experiences and expectations in Pakistan. Women residing in urban areas and belonging to the middle and upper classes in Pakistan are more likely to work outside their homes, pursue careers and enjoy increased mobility (Sathar & Kazi, 1997).

The institutional landscape in Pakistan is also unsupportive of non-traditional work–family arrangements, owing to inadequate social welfare provisions, lack of unemployment benefits and ineffective implementation of existing policies (Parvez et al., 2015). While the government has taken steps like the National Policy for Development and Empowerment of Women to boost female labour participation and the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act 2010 to ensure workplace safety, the effectiveness and implementation of these policies have been inconsistent across sectors and regions (Yasmin & Jabeen, 2017). Similarly, despite the Maternity Benefits Ordinance (1958) offering 12 weeks of paid maternity leave for eligible female employees (WHO, 1993), most workplaces in Pakistan do not implement this policy (Masood & Nisar, 2020). Paternity leave provisions are minimal and rarely utilised, reinforcing the traditional belief that child-rearing is primarily a woman's responsibility (Ali & Syed, 2017). Access to affordable and quality childcare services also remains a major challenge, and extended family, particularly grandparents, often play a crucial role in child-rearing. However, despite the prevalence of these barriers, an increasing number of Pakistani women have assumed the role of breadwinners for their families. Women's participation in Pakistan's predominantly male-centric job market has increased across various sectors, including banking, academia, law, medicine, engineering and development. This has also led to a growing number of couples where the female partner out earns their male counterparts. However, this is still an under researched group with no available data about their actual number, and there is a scarcity of academic documentation of their experiences.

Keeping in view the above discussion, my study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in different dimensions. First, most of the current literature has used data from Western and specifically American cultural contexts (e.g., Bertrand et al., 2015; Winslow, 2011), and there is a scarcity of female-breadwinning research from the Global South, especially in the Pakistani cultural context. Madsen and Scribner (2017) analysed 152 articles focused on different gender-related labour market issues, where developing countries like Pakistan were represented in only one study. Second, research on women as breadwinners in Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan is needed to explore their specific experiences (Syed & Ali, 2013). Third, different scholars and researchers have also emphasised the need for more research in the domain of female labour market participation and the hurdles and challenges they face in developing parts of the world (Holden et al., 2015; Madsen & Scribner, 2017).

2 | METHODS

Constructivist grounded theory by Charmaz (2014) guided my study design through participant sampling, data collection and data analysis. This version of grounded theory provides support to new researchers through its incorporation of analytical frameworks developed in the classic grounded theory of Strauss and Corbin (Nagel et al., 2015). This method allows for the flexibility of the researcher to engage with participants, explain the phenomenon of interest and co-construct theories with them. By employing a constructivist approach, I managed my personal opinions, views, perceptions and knowledge from past experiences reflexively to avoid inadvertently forcing the data and prioritising the participants' views (Charmaz, 2018). The role of reflexivity was crucial in ensuring my sensitivity to the participants' main concerns about their gender-atypical roles. During the analysis, I strove to maintain a balance between the vantage points of participants and the researcher while remaining open-minded and attentive to the participants, their stories and new directions and possibilities during data gathering and analysis (Charmaz, 2014). This study was conducted following all the standard ethical protocols of social research and was approved by the ethics committee of Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany. I also took informed consent from all the study participants, and the information and data they provided were kept anonymous and confidential. Furthermore, all names used in the data are pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

2.1 | Participants

I used a purposive sampling strategy to recruit participants. This strategy was useful for selecting participants from couples with the female partner as the sole or main earner. As the study advanced, I switched to theoretical sampling, an evolving process in grounded theory that allows emerging themes to guide further data collection (Charmaz, 2018). Participants were recruited from both, rural and urban areas in Islamabad, Pakistan, focusing on couples where the woman was the sole or dominant earner. Finding such couples was challenging due to the topic's sensitive nature and the societal stigma attached to non-normative FB arrangements. The major obstacle was convincing the male partners in these couples, who, because of their stigmatised identity, were hesitant to agree to an interview. They were also unwilling to permit their female partners to be interviewed. In the cultural context, men often decide with whom the women in their family can communicate. Therefore, I had to negotiate with them first before conducting interviews with both partners.

To overcome these challenges, I utilised my personal contacts, social media sites and the assistance of individuals within the community to persuade couples to participate in interviews. Leveraging personal connections and soliciting volunteers in FB arrangements on social media enabled me to reach prospective participants and collect the desired data after getting their formal consent for the interviews. I navigated

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the complex socio-cultural landscape by employing these strategies and gathered valuable data to inform my research.

The tool for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide, which is congruent with the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014). The guide included open-ended questions on topics like household chores, finances, decision-making, daily routines, partner conflicts and societal responses. I interviewed 10 women responsible for the breadwinning role and 10 men who shared the female breadwinning arrangement and had been out of the labour force for at least 1 year or more. Out of the 20 participants, three interviews were conducted with couples (both partners were interviewed simultaneously and at the same location), while the remaining 14 involved partners being interviewed separately. I conducted in total seven couple interviews where I excluded four of them from the analysis for its lack of richness and used three of them for the analysis. The experiences reported by couples in both interview formats (couple and individual) were similar, with a minor distinction where the male partners predominantly led couple interviews. There was no major difference in the couple's experiences, irrespective of the interview setting and format. The primary distinction between the two types of interviews was the depth and richness of the responses, with individual interviews yielding more detailed and informative data compared with the less detailed couple interviews.

My initial attempt was to interview both partners in a couple situation simultaneously; however, this approach proved to be less effective, as most of the interviews were dominated by the male partners, preventing the female partners from speaking openly on the topic. As a result, I adjusted my approach. I interviewed the women in their workplaces, where they could speak without male influence, and spoke with the men in settings where they felt comfortable. This modification allowed for more open and genuine responses from the participants.

I audio recorded all interviews with the consent of the participants in a voice recording device. Interviews were conducted in Pashto and Urdu languages, which were largely spoken languages in the study area. The average interview length was 50–90 min. After each interview, I transcribed it verbatim in English while considering the conceptual sensitivity of key themes and concepts used. After transcribing all data, I reviewed transcriptions and removed errors and omissions, if there were any. Reviewing interview transcripts supported the authenticity of the data I collected. It enabled me to get immersed in the data and hear the fluency, tone and voice inflections of the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

2.2 | Data analysis

I employed a technique essential to the grounded theory method called constant comparative analysis, where the collected data were analysed simultaneously while collecting new data. During the interview process, the analysis incorporated exploratory prompts and adapting questions in response to answers from the participants. I then performed extensive data analysis between interviews. The iterative style of analysing and collecting data proved beneficial in guiding further theoretical sampling and refining emerging conceptual ideas. The method of constant comparison, wherein I compared the data collected through sequentially increasing abstraction levels, facilitated the identification of abstract ideas necessary for theoretical sufficiency. Glaser and Strauss (1967) recognised the constant comparison method as a fundamental aspect of classic grounded theory research. However, its ability to move beyond mere descriptive assumptions and develop systematic conceptual and abstract frameworks has become essential to all grounded theory approaches (Birks & Mills, 2015).

During and after each interview, I made field notes that captured not only the participants' responses but also emerging questions and my initial impressions of the data (Charmaz, 2014). These notes were helpful for reflection and later re-immersion into the data. I also created research memos to facilitate the data analysis. These memos also enriched the theoretical abstractions that emerged during the analysis. For coding the data, I followed a three-step process consisting of initial, focused and theoretical coding.

The initial phase yielded a variety of codes touching upon daily activities, distribution of chores, the multifaceted implications of female breadwinning, societal backlash, experiences of stigmatisation, relationship difficulties, coping mechanisms and available social support networks, among other aspects. This initial phase was followed by focused coding, which involved synthesising, separating and sorting the data. The final phase was theoretical coding, where I aligned different categories of codes based on their similarities and contrasts. At this stage, I wove together the codes that emerged during focused coding to establish coherent relationships between the codes and data. The result of this coding phase was the emergence of three overarching themes – gendered expectations and societal stigmas associated with female breadwinning, relationship dynamics, and coping strategies for managing societal reactions – which were selected for final analysis in this manuscript. The constant comparative method I employed facilitated a multi-level analysis that included comparing codes to data, new data to existing data, codes to other codes, categories to concepts, categories with categories and concepts with existing literature and theories. In line with the principles of constructivist grounded theory, I also analysed the consequences, conditions and context within the data through developing partnership with participants that enabled a meaningful reconstruction of their stories into a grounded theory (Mills et al., 2006).

3 | RESULTS

The results of the study are divided into three sections. First, I elaborate on the social pressure FBCs encounter and the stigmatisation stemming from the social pressures for their non-normative roles. Then, I discuss how the non-normative breadwinning arrangement affects the couple's relationship dynamics. In the last section, I shed light on the strategies the couples adopt to deal with societal responses, social pressures and relationship problems resulting from their gender non-normative roles.

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3.1 | Gendered expectations and social stigmatisation of FBCs

The institutionalised cultural values and norms, manifested through gendered expectations, which are the societal assumptions and beliefs about how individuals of a particular gender should behave, feel, think or interact with others, influence the circumstances surrounding FBCs and their experiences in Pakistan. The gendered expectations are translated into societal pressures in various forms, including serotyping and stigmatisation. One way in which social pressures are manifested is through the disapproval and resistance FBCs face from their communities when they assume gender non-normative roles. My data show that breadwinning women were often stereotyped as being *neglectful of their families* and failing in their duties as wives and mothers. They were perceived as *bad mothers* and *not a good homemaker*. These stereotypes further undermine women's ability to assert their power and agency within their relationships, as they may internalise these negative perceptions and feel a sense of guilt or inadequacy (Parvez et al., 2015). Similarly, men were considered less worthy of respect and labelled as, *Beghairat* (pimps) and possessing feminine traits. Samina, who was the breadwinner for her family for three years, shared her experiences regarding societal responses:

> Samina: 'You couldn't imagine how they (in-laws and people in the community) talk, saying I'm a bad wife and a bad mother …… [long pause] just because I earn the most. Like I can't be a good wife or a good mom if I'm working. I wish they'd see how hard it is, doing all this. They also not leaving my husband alone …… he is labelled as pimp and someone …. not worthy of respect …. just because he is dependent on my earning'.

The data further show that female breadwinners faced social stigma and judgment from people, including their family members, friends and colleagues. For example, one participant named Ayesha in the study reported that her colleagues and friends view her as '*too ambitious*' and '*too aggressive*' because she is the primary breadwinner in her family. Most male partners in the FB arrangements also perceived the financial contribution of the female household member as supplementary and temporary. Aslam, who was in a FB arrangement for the last two years, shared his views in this regard:

> Aslam: 'I totally understand, you know… not currently making money for my family, and it's … hard. Society, it's kind of … looks down when a man's dependent on his wife's paycheck. And I, I've always … uh, always been the breadwinner. But now, I'm jobless, and it's … a rough spot. But I'm not letting it … wreck our home. I'm job hunting, yeah, and … when I get one, my wife, she can stop working. Her salary, it's just … not enough for us to live comfortably'.

The data further indicate that while both partners in FB arrangements experience negative stereotyping and social stigmatisation, men were more susceptible to such responses. They were stigmatised for not adhering to the traditional gender norm of male breadwinning. Ali, a study participant who has been jobless for five years while his wife works as a nurse, described his experience with stigmatisation:

> Ali: 'Everyone sees me as less of a man because I depend on my wife's earnings. Almost every day, I face questioning about my unemployment and my wife's career. These inquiries aim to mock me …. They use bad names …. Am called *Beghairat* (shameless), *Dalla* (pimp), and so on …. And the worst part is that my own family … my siblings, my parents …. they also disrespect me'.

A further expression of stigma reflected in my data was the perception that female earnings are *devoid of blessings* and hence regarded as inferior to male earnings, even if women's income surpasses that of men. The notion of male earnings possessing blessings was internalised, serving as a means to devalue women's financial contributions and perpetuate male dominance within the household. Asma, who was the sole earner for her family, shared her views in this regard:

> Asma: 'Despite my contributions, my earnings are continually devalued by my family, including my husband. My mother-in-law, for instance, regularly taunts me about the economic benefits that a male breadwinner could bring to our family. She often says, there is no blessing in a woman earning …. and our financial situation would have been better had a male been the primary earner. To be honest …. Now I find myself partially agreeing with their perspective that a woman's income may not have God's blessings. I think they are right about it …'

Along with social stigmatisation, FBCs also faced social isolation and social exclusion. They were deemed unworthy of respect due to their violation of prevalent gender norms, leading many people to avoid contact with them. Financial constraints and the desire to escape negative judgments further reduced their participation in community and family events and ceremonies. In some cases, they strategically used social isolation to evade unfavourable societal judgments.

One study participant shared his experience of social isolation stemming from negative societal reactions:

> Jamal: 'When I go out, people insult me. They see me as someone who relies on his wife's income. They mock and stigmatize me. Their reactions have led me to limit my time outside the house. So, I think a lot before going out …… it's better to stay home and avoid their mean comments and teasing'.

When I inquired his wife about her experience with social isolation, she replied:

> Kainat: 'I also avoid attending events and gatherings. People at these functions ask me about my husband's

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> employment status, my work experiences, and my husband's homemaking skills, often in a mocking manner. They also ridicule my husband in front of me. Now I only attend gatherings when absolutely necessary… like going for *Dua* (funeral), besides that, no other participation'.

In conclusion, these interview accounts reflect the various challenges FBCs experience in their daily lives. These challenges include social stigmatisation from their surrounding community in the form of negative labelling and name-calling, as well as social isolation and exclusion. This reveals the harsh realities of defying gender norms and the impact it has on the daily lives, mental well-being and self-perception of FBCs in Pakistan. These couples often bear the brunt of ridicule, judgment and isolation, even from their own families, making their struggles even more challenging.

3.2 | Female breadwinning and couples' relationship dynamics

The traditional gender roles that dictate men as the primary breadwinners are deeply rooted in Pakistan's cultural, religious and historical contexts. Female breadwinning, therefore, significantly impacts couple relationship dynamics in such an environment. The shift in financial responsibility from husband to wife brings about a range of emotions and reactions, both within the couple and from the society they live in. My data show that this change in the work–family arrangement was mostly viewed as a deviation from established norms, leading to resistance and disapproval, particularly in rural areas and extended family contexts.

Among a few couples, the wife's role as the primary earner fostered a sense of partnership and mutual respect. The male partner in these couple constellations also took additional responsibilities in the home, such as childcare and household chores, while the wife focused on her breadwinning role. However, this pattern was limited only to three couples who were highly educated and lived in urban areas. For most couples, the change in dynamics has resulted in their feelings of insecurity, frustration and resentment. Saima, a breadwinner for her household, shared her experiences in this regard:

> Saima: 'Well … you know, it's absolutely not easy … this whole situation. I mean … I can feel it, this … insecurity, in my husband. It's like he feels less of a man because I earn … and it's … difficult. I am observing it … how it is putting a strain on our relationship … in ways I never imagined it would. The daily scuffle …… the blame game and so on …'

The concept of male breadwinning is closely tied to a man's sense of honour and social standing in the context of family and community (Meisenbach, 2010). As a result, when a woman becomes the primary earner, it is perceived as a threat to the man's position within the family and the community. For most of the men, this perception then gave rise to feelings of shame, embarrassment or even anger, further straining the couple's relationship. When I asked Ahmed, a SAHF, regarding his experiences and opinion about his FB arrangement, he stated:

> Ahmed: 'To be honest …. it has been quite difficult for both of us. Our families and the people in our community simply don't understand our situation …… I am seen as less of a man because I am …. not the one providing for our family. The constant judgment and criticism make me feel ashamed and embarrassed, and it has definitely …… affected my relationship with my wife and children, and I would say, not in a positive way ……'

Furthermore, the societal expectations surrounding women's roles within the family also created a double burden for female breadwinners, who were expected to not only provide financially for their families but also fulfil their caregiving and domestic responsibilities. This double burden of responsibilities also had a significant impact on women's well-being, mental health and overall quality of life. Aqsa narrated her experiences in this regard:

> Aqsa: 'Earning for my family of course carry a sense of accomplishment. But … when it comes to decisions, familial, financial, or otherwise … it's still … very much his domain. I sometimes wonder … whether my earning really … really changes anything at all. Okay that's also fine, but …. there is no support in chores and household tasks at all. That's something the most disturbing for me'.

Additionally, the family, friends and community mostly question the woman's priorities and accuse her of *neglecting* the family for her career. This added pressure also resulted in stress and self-doubt for most women, and these feelings of insecurity and judgment mostly translated to daily scuffles between the couple partners. Some couples talked about the communication breakdown between them, leading to misunderstandings and conflicts.

One of the participants, Fatima, shared her experiences in this regard:

> Fatima: 'There have been several occasions where people commented that I should be staying at home …., taking care of my family. They make me feel guilty for pursuing my career, and it's hard to ignore their judgments. My husband also feels to be disrespected by some of our friends and family members. And it's very challenging for both of us …… to navigate this situation and maintain trust and respect within our relationship'.

Furthermore, owing to social isolation and exclusion, many couples found themselves increasingly detached from their support networks while grappling with societal judgment and familial disapproval. This isolation from their support networks and the surrounding community also impacted their relationships, as there was a lack of external

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mediation during conflicts between them. Samia, shared her view in this regard:

> Saima: 'Well …. since we've become more isolated from our support networks and community, we've noticed that our relationship has been affected. We don't have the same mediation from friends and family as we used to, and it makes resolving conflicts more challenging. We argue over small things like household chores or coming home late from work, and it seems like these disagreements have become more frequent and intense'.

The data further show that non-normative work–family arrangements not only affected the relationship dynamics of FBCs, but it also had negative consequences for their children. For instance, these couples stated that their children faced teasing and bullying from their peers, who viewed their family as '*different*' and '*abnormal*'. The couples also talked about their worries that their children are experiencing confusion and internal conflict as they try to reconcile the gender roles, they observe at home with those they are taught in their broader social environment.

3.3 | Strategies to navigate non-normative gender roles: the intersection of discretion, relocation and performing gender identities

FBCs used various strategies and practices to deal with the stigmatisation and relationship problems stemming from their non-normative work–family roles. One such strategy was maintaining social distance and exercising discretion to evade harsh judgments and mistreatment from people. Most of the couples talked about their decreasing participation in gatherings and events since adopting the non-normative roles. They were of the view that by keeping their arrangement private, they could navigate their unique circumstances with minimal interference from others.

Fatima shared her thoughts on keeping their arrangement private:

> Fatima: 'We decided early on that we would only share our situation with a few close friends and family members who we knew would be understanding and supportive. It's challenging enough to navigate our roles without the constant judgment and questioning from others. I mean dealing with these different roles and then listening to all the bad talk about us …… But am glad that our strategy is working …… By keeping our arrangement discreet, we have been able to experience less severe negative judgments form the surrounding people'.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that the strategies of discretion and distancing from community members were primarily feasible for FBCs residing in urban areas, while rural couples faced greater challenges in implementing these tactics. Urban settings offered opportunities to maintain distance from neighbours and the wider community, enabling couples to preserve their privacy more easily. Conversely, in tight-knit rural communities, where individuals tend to know each other more intimately and often involve themselves in each other's personal affairs, discretion and social isolation proved less effective as coping strategies.

The unique sociocultural dynamics of rural areas required FBCs to develop alternative approaches, like relocating, for addressing societal pressures and stigma related to their nontraditional work–family roles. Sameera, a 33-year-old doctor, and her husband, Ali, a 35-year-old stay-at-home dad, relocated from a small town in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province to the urban centre of Islamabad. Sameera shared her views regarding their relocation:

> Sameera: 'The stares …… the gossip …… and the constant questioning …… from our families and neighbors became unbearable. They mocked Ali …. for not being the breadwinner, and we faced a lot of negative judgment from the community. We needed a place where our arrangement could be more acceptable, and that's why we decided to move to urban Islamabad. It's a lot better here ….'

Furthermore, FB arrangement was perceived as a threat to the feminine and masculine identities of the couple partners. To cope with and reclaim this lost sense of identity, both couple partners were involved in various forms of doing masculinities and doing femininities (Butler, 1995). Men resorted to avoiding traditional homemaking tasks to reclaim their sense of masculinity and maintain power within the relationship. They emphasised their involvement in traditionally masculine tasks, such as grocery shopping, financial management and decision-making. They also downplayed their female partner's financial contributions. Similarly, aggressive behaviour within the household sphere was another strategy manifested in various ways, including verbal abuse, emotional manipulation or controlling behaviour. One such instance was discussed by a participant, Alina, who was the sole earner for her family. She stated:

> Alina: 'I feel that my financial success is viewed as a threat to my husband's masculinity. My husband has become more controlling and demanding since I have started earning more money …… he has begun to question my decisions and every move. His behavior is very surprising for me …… I am supporting the whole family, and he gets angry on me and our children unnecessarily … sometimes even exhibiting abusive behavior'.

Similarly, most of these women actively engaged in traditional gender roles alongside their non-normative breadwinning responsibilities to mitigate the stigma associated with their unconventional work–family arrangements. This involved employing a range of behaviours and strategies, such as adopting a submissive demeanour, deferring to their partner in decision-making processes, understating their financial contributions and intensifying their engagement in conventional domestic and caregiving tasks. One interviewee, Saira, who worked in a private company, shared her perspective:

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> Saira: 'Although I serve as the primary breadwinner for my family, my earnings are relatively modest. My husband used to earn much more than I do …… but he is currently without employment. But … but he is also exploring alternative avenues of income, he has some business ideas with a friend and freelance work. And I think there is good potential in these endeavors …. I just pray for his success …. so, the things get better for us'.

Saira's response aligns with the argument that women also play a role in promoting male breadwinning (Rao, 2020). This sentiment was particularly prevalent among my study participants, who expressed a desire and favoured their male partners to assume the primary breadwinning role. Similarly, these breadwinning women tended to take on a disproportionate share of domestic and caregiving responsibilities, devoting significant time and effort to cooking, cleaning and caring for children, often at the expense of their personal or professional ambitions.

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of FBCs in Pakistan, where no such prior studies exist. The findings show that the traditional understanding of gender norms, which places men as the primary breadwinners and women as the primary caregivers, played a key role in shaping the experiences of FBCs. These gender norms are deeply embedded in Pakistani society and reinforced through familial, religious and cultural expectations. There is an ever-present pressure to adhere to these norms, and any transgression, such as FB arrangement, is deemed culturally inappropriate, provoking stigmatisation, social disapproval and exclusion. Similarly, confronting these gender norms is also viewed as a direct reflection of an individual's moral character (Ahmad, 2010), and in this study context, a '*good*' character is essentially equated with compliance with these established gender norms. In essence, societal members are expected to both enact and embody these prevailing gender norms, and the FB arrangement was seen as a failure, resulting in varying degrees of stigma and negative societal judgments for FBCs.

While existing literature predominantly focuses on the negative (Heilman, 1983; Heilman & Wallen, 2010; Rudman et al., 2012) and positive (Lobel et al., 2001; Deutsch et al., 2003) evaluations of individuals deviating from gender norms and the backlash they experience (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007), these analyses are often confined within an outcome-oriented framework that merely observes the consequences of such deviations. However, this study shows the underlying process of how individuals, specifically within the cultural context of Pakistan, experience these gender norms. The findings also reveal that the stigma associated with gender norm violations profoundly touches various facets of the participants' identities. For instance, female participants recounted being labelled as '*too ambitious*' or *neglectful* of their family responsibilities, challenging their traditional role as primary caregivers. Similarly, the male participants faced labels such as '*less worthy of respect*', '*Beghairat*' (shameless) and '*Dalla*' (pimp), indicating a societal critique of their deviation from the normative role as the primary breadwinner. These labels, deeply ingrained in cultural narratives, were viewed by the participants as derogatory and stigmatising and caused stress and other mental and emotional issues, compelling couples to adopt coping strategies ranging from engagement to disengagement. In terms of engagement, some women and men reasserted traditional roles alongside their breadwinning responsibilities to mitigate stigma – essentially a form of cognitive restructuring (e.g., despite being the breadwinners, women increased their participation in household tasks and undervalued their financial contributions, men on other hand avoided participation in chores, and considered the female breadwinning as a temporary arrangement). The FBCs manifested disengagement by avoiding societal gatherings or decreasing public appearances to minimise judgment and scrutiny, which aligns with *avoiding stressors* as posited by the stigma perspective (Crocker et al., 1998; Connor-Smith et al., 2000).

The study further contributes to the literature by demonstrating that while the social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and stress-coping perspectives (Miller & Kaiser, 2001; Miller, 2006) emphasise the cognitive, behavioural and emotional aspects of coping, many current models that address coping with stigma tend to generalise stigma stressors and devalued social identities. Although the social context of stigma has been recognised in the literature (Crocker et al., 1998; Goffman, 1968), many studies generalise their findings, overlooking the unique contexts in which stigmas are explored. This study, therefore, goes beyond an overly individualistic perspective, which predominantly emphasises personal coping choices and views coping in terms of managing stress and its outcomes. Instead, it complements existing studies that consider how social contexts shape and limit the strategies available to individuals (Aveling et al., 2010; Howarth, 2006) and how coping with stigma is a meaning-making process where individuals reframe their self-conception and actions in response to societal perceptions (Kadianaki, 2014). This perspective shifts the narrative from an individual-focused, outcome-centric view to a more social, process-oriented understanding of stigma, exploring how societal views are internalised as stigmatising and subsequently contested in the specific cultural contexts.

For instance, in Western contexts, FB arrangement might challenge traditional gender norms, and couples in such arrangement might experience stigmatisation associated with breaking these norms. However, the degree of this stigma is usually mitigated by various socio-cultural safety nets and a broader acceptance of diverse family structures (Jurczyk et al., 2019). The FB arrangement is also generally becoming more accepted in these contexts (Chesley, 2017; Medved, 2016). However, FBCs in Pakistan are not just challenging gender norms; they are contending with a complex intersection of religious beliefs, cultural and familial expectations, and societal norms that stigmatise any violation of gender norms. Traditional Islamic teachings often place men as the primary breadwinners, responsible for providing for their families. While these roles are not universally applied or interpreted the same way across all Islamic communities, they tend to be more rigidly adhered to, in conservative societies like Pakistan (Bilwani & Anjum,

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2022). Therefore, a FBC is not merely defying gender expectations but also countering religious teachings that have been deeply ingrained into the cultural psyche.

Furthermore, religion plays a key role in shaping cultural norms in Pakistan, and the notion that female earnings lack '*blessings*' suggests that religious beliefs are being used to devalue women's contributions and stigmatise the couples. This intertwining of cultural biases with religious values leads to internalised beliefs that most of the couples in this study found hard to challenge. Further, this is not just an isolated incident but rather symptomatic of deeply ingrained gender biases perpetuated across various domains. These biases were decisive to the extent that most women have begun to believe that their income indeed lacks '*blessings*', perpetuating a cycle of gender inequality. This is also a classic example of how societal beliefs can be internalised to the point where the stigmatised individuals themselves start to validate the stigma, creating a vicious cycle (Eagly & Koenig, 2021). Similar religious interpretations like women's 'appropriate space is at home' and 'breadwinning is a male domain' further exacerbate the existing stigmas the couples in counter-normative roles were experiencing.

Similarly, the scope and severity of the stigma FBCs in this study faced was more intense compared with findings from studies in Western settings (e.g., Caperton et al., 2020; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). These couples not only faced ridicule or derogatory names; they were also subjected to differential treatment and social exclusion, often pushing them to relocate for their well-being. *Relocation* as a coping mechanism might appear extreme from a Western viewpoint, where relationships with extended family are usually more elective, providing couples with a broader range of alternatives, including access to social support networks, professional help, access to therapists and counsellors, and provision of rights and legal protection from the state to navigate recurrent normative pressures (Medved, 2016). However, the gendered segregation of spheres, rigid gender norms, close-knit family system and strict cultural norms around family relations (Mumtaz & Salway, 2009), constituted the specific context where couples were left with no other options, but compelled to relocate to avoid social stigmatisation. It signifies an intense form of '*social exclusion*', where the stigma is so pervasive and detrimental that the couple's social and emotional well-being, and perhaps even their safety, is compromised to the extent that they feel they have no option but to physically remove themselves from the environment. It is also imperative to understand the implications of this relocation, which could be multifaceted, especially considering the close-knit family structure and the importance of community in Pakistani culture. Relocation might lead to severed ties with family and friends and loss of social support systems. It can also entail economic implications such as loss of job or business contacts for both partners. Over time, this could exacerbate emotional stress, feelings of isolation, and economic instability.

Furthermore, keeping the FB arrangement *secret* from the surrounding community to avoid stigma caused extra mental burden and stress for the couples. To provide context, family honour or *ghar ke izzat* is pivotal in Pakistani society, often tied closely with the gendered roles and behaviours of family members (Winkvist & Akhtar, 2000), and families make consistent efforts to keep the honourable title of the family intact, primarily through strict gendered division of roles between men and women. Therefore, if it becomes public knowledge that a couple has adopted FB arrangement, it is construed not only as a violation of prevalent gender norms but also risks violating this deeply held concept of '*izzat*', or honour, thereby causing their family to 'lose face'. FBCs, therefore, adopted *discretion* or keeping their FB arrangement *secret* as a strategy and avoided sharing information about this arrangement with the outside community. The idea of keeping secrets from extended family and the surrounding community about such an arrangement indicates the level of social pressure and anticipated negative societal judgments. Similarly, discretion also resulted in detachment from any possible support networks, exacerbating the emotional strains and disagreements. These results align with previous studies which shows that concealing a stigmatised identity can be a profound emotional burden, with a host of negative implications for an individual's psychological, mental and social well-being (Pachankis, 2007; Quinn & Earnshaw, 2011). Such constant self-monitoring also requires significant cognitive resources, detracting from cognitive efficiency and impacting one's ability to perform various tasks (Smart & Wegner, 1999).

The study also adds nuances to the existing literature on the relationship outcomes for couples with gender non-normative work–family arrangements, which has often been framed in terms of marital satisfaction (Helms et al., 2019; Marshall, 2008) or dissatisfaction (Greenstein, 1995; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). This study's findings go beyond this discussion and show the process through which relationships in counter-normative couples are affected. For instance, FBCs adopted *performing gender identities* as a *normalisation* strategy to reclaim traditional masculinity and femininity but did so in ways that undermined their marital relationship. Men, for example, tried to navigate societal pressures by deliberately distancing themselves from traditional homemaking roles. Instead, they took on tasks traditionally coded as masculine, such as financial management and decision-making, as a way to reassert their masculinity. At times, this even escalated into aggressive behaviours, including verbal abuse and emotional manipulation of their female partners. While these actions deliberated to reclaim their lost sense of masculinity, they also introduced power imbalances and strains within the relationship. Likewise, women in breadwinning roles were also driven by societal expectations to reaffirm their femininity. As a result, they assumed an unequal burden of household and caregiving duties, often at the expense of their career aspirations and well-being. In some cases, women even ceded control over their earnings to their male partners, downplayed the importance of their financial contributions, and overstated the financial role of their male partners. While these strategies may have temporarily aligned them with conventional expectations of femininity, they took a toll on their well-being and added layers of tension to their relationships. This tension was evident in the interview accounts of these couples, where they discussed frequent disagreements arising from the unequal distribution of domestic duties and other responsibilities.

In summary, the findings of this study shed light on the context-specific nature of gender norms and stigmatisation of individuals

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with non-normative roles. In terms of theoretical contributions, this study offers empirical support for extending frameworks like Heilman's Lack of Fit Model, the stigma perspective and identity framework to non-Western, collectivistic society. They enrich these theoretical perspectives by incorporating the cultural specificities of the Pakistani context, such as the way 'moral character' is closely tied to social roles, and the role of religion and extended family in shaping experiences with gender non-normative roles. In doing so, this study not only contributes to the field by providing a nuanced, culturally informed analysis but also signals the need for social-psychological theories to be more inclusive and adaptable to diverse cultural realities. It is also pertinent to mention that these findings are context-specific and may only apply to the particular social group analysed. For a more comprehensive understanding, the experiences of FBCs across various social classes, contexts and ethnic groups with diverse gender ideologies could be further explored. Similarly, while my study did not delve deeper into the impact of this non-normative arrangement on the well-being of children within FBCs, future studies exploring this aspect would provide valuable insights into the academic literature on the topic.

Beyond its implications for social psychology, this study also has practical implications. The issues these FBCs experience need attention and must be tackled to further gender equality in settings like Pakistan. For instance, the strategy of relocation adopted by some couples to escape social stigma and societal responses speaks to the degree of social exclusion and isolation they face, requiring comprehensive societal transformations. Such change could encompass educational initiatives and possibly legislative measures that challenge these traditional norms. Similarly, the burden of secrecy around non-normative roles suggests a pervasive issue of social stigma that complicates efforts to advance gender equality. To address this, fostering more inclusive and accepting environments is crucial. This could be achieved through creating more open, supportive environments, perhaps through community education programs and involving people across different spheres of life so that couples do not feel the need to hide their non-normative work–family arrangements. Finally, given the religious tenor of the society, where religious interpretations are used to stigmatise non-normative roles and behaviours, more inclusive religious interpretations are needed, and engaging religious leaders could be instrumental in advancing gender equality.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data available for this study cannot be shared publicly due to ethical concerns or privacy of the research participants.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA).

STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

The author took informed consent from all the participants of the study.

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