

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE WAITRESS IN PAKISTAN

Original Research

Afia Irfan^{1*}, Shirmeen Ijaz², Sahar Tassahuq³, Iqra Imtiaz⁴, Maryiam Asghar³, Muhammad Bilal Arif⁶

¹MS Scholar, Riphah Institute of Professional Psychology, Riphah International University Islamabad, Lahore Campus, Lahore, Pakistan.

²Assistant Professor, Riphah Institute of Clinical and Professional Psychology, Riphah International University Islamabad, Lahore Campus, Lahore, Pakistan.

³Clinical Psychologist, Pakistan Recovery Oasis, Lahore, Pakistan.

⁴Alumni, Riphah Institute of Professional Psychology, Riphah International University Islamabad, Lahore Campus, Lahore, Pakistan.

⁵Psychologist, Pakistan Institute of Living and Learning (PILL), Karachi, Pakistan.

Corresponding Author: Afia Irfan, MS Scholar, Riphah Institute of Professional Psychology, Riphah International University Islamabad, Lahore Campus, Lahore, Pakistan. afiaa1799@gmail.com

Acknowledgement: The authors gratefully acknowledge the participants for their invaluable contributions to this study.

Conflict of Interest: None

Grant Support & Financial Support: None

ABSTRACT

Background: This study investigates the lived experiences of female waitresses in Pakistan, focusing on the challenges and societal perceptions they face. With the expansion of the hospitality sector, understanding these experiences is crucial for addressing issues of gender inequality and workplace discrimination prevalent in service-oriented professions.

Objective: The research aims to explore the range of experiences, both negative and positive, that shape the lives of female waitresses, contributing to the discourse on gender and labor in the service industry.

Methods: A phenomenological research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews to collect data from seven female waitresses aged 18 to 25 years from marriage halls in Lahore. Non-probability, purposive sampling was applied to select participants. Data analysis was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to identify key themes.

Results: The analysis revealed significant themes such as job selection, emotional and psychological impacts, social problems, workplace environment, social perception, job satisfaction, and coping mechanisms. Participants reported widespread physical and verbal harassment, financial exploitation, and a lack of supportive colleagues or management. Despite these challenges, some waitresses reported gains in financial independence and improved family conditions.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the need for systemic improvements in the service sector to address harassment, pay inequity, and the lack of career advancement opportunities for female waitresses. Enhancing workplace conditions and societal respect for service workers is critical for their mental health and overall well-being.

Keywords: Female Waitresses; Gender Inequality; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; Lived Experiences; Phenomenological Research; Service Industry; Workplace Harassment.

INTRODUCTION

In Pakistan, the role of a waitress encompasses far more than the mere delivery of food and drinks; it involves a complex interplay of gender dynamics, societal expectations, and economic pressures. This research paper aims to delve into the lived experiences of female waitresses, focusing on the emotional and psychological challenges they face in an industry marked by rapid growth and prevalent gender disparities. The role of a waitress, historically rooted in personal maid service, continues to carry connotations of class and gender inequality, thereby framing the context of this study(1, 2). The burgeoning restaurant and hospitality sector in Pakistan employs a significant number of women as servers, a role that requires managing busy shifts, handling customer interactions, and performing emotional labor—modulating one's emotions to meet the job's demands. Despite the pivotal role these women play in ensuring the smooth operation of dining establishments and the overall customer experience, there remains a substantial gap in research concerning their well-being and the intricacies of their work environment. This paper seeks to address this gap by exploring the nuanced realities of these workers, whose contributions are often overshadowed by the challenges they endure, including financial instability, work-family conflict, and workplace harassment(3, 4).

Research indicates that the demands of such roles can have severe implications for mental health, affecting servers' ability to perform and leading to high turnover rates, which in turn impact the operational success of establishments. This study is particularly concerned with how the dual pressures of emotional labor and societal stigma affect these women's mental health and well-being, contributing to a cycle of stress and dissatisfaction that extends beyond the workplace into personal and social realms(5, 6). The objective of this research is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors driving women to take up waitress roles despite these challenges, the lasting effects on their personal and social lives, and the coping strategies they employ. By integrating insights from interviews with female servers and reviewing relevant literature on labor dynamics and mental health in the service industry, this introduction sets the stage for a deeper investigation into these critical issues, aiming to enhance understanding and foster improvements in policy and practice in the hospitality sector(7, 8).

METHODS

The methodology for this study employed a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of female waitresses within the age range of 18 to 25 years in Pakistan. Seven participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring that each shared a similar socioeconomic background from the middle class, which aimed to maintain homogeneity within the study group. This qualitative research utilized semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary tool for data collection, striking a balance between obtaining consistent data and allowing for the personal experiences of the participants to be expressed freely(9, 10). The study was conducted with prior approval from the relevant authorities, including marriage halls where the participants were employed, ensuring ethical compliance and consideration of participants' welfare. All participants provided informed consent, understanding the nature and purpose of the research. The interviews were conducted in Urdu to ensure clarity and better understanding for the participants. Each session was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants, and these recordings were subsequently transcribed verbatim to capture the nuances of their responses(11, 12).

Data analysis followed the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which allowed for an inductive approach in identifying themes across the data. The analytical process began with transcription of the audio recordings, followed by a detailed coding of the transcriptions to develop themes that reflect the participants' experiences and perceptions(13, 14). This research adhered to ethical standards, including confidentiality and the right to withdraw from the study at any point. The ethical considerations and the data collection methods were designed to ensure the integrity of the research and the protection of the participants involved.(15, 16)

RESULTS

The results of this qualitative study revealed a profound insight into the lived experiences of female waitresses in Pakistan, emphasizing the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions of their work. Analysis of the interviews identified several superordinate themes that illustrate the complex interplay of factors influencing these women's lives and work.

Job Selection: The primary motivations for entering the waitress profession were financial necessity, immediate employment opportunities, and the absence of stringent educational requirements. Many participants viewed this job as a vital means to support their families, given the lack of alternative employment opportunities. The choice was also influenced by a pressing need to fulfill household responsibilities.

Emotional and Psychological Impact: Participants frequently reported feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression, compounded by experiences of physical and verbal abuse. The emotional labor required in their roles often led to feelings of dehumanization and powerlessness, which were exacerbated by harsh treatment from customers and the societal stigma attached to their jobs.

Social Problems and Public Perception: The study highlighted significant social discrimination against waitresses, including verbal harassment and economic exploitation. These issues contributed to a pervasive sense of insecurity and inferiority among the participants. Public perception was overwhelmingly negative, with waitresses often viewed through a lens of conservative and gender-biased stereotypes, further affecting their social interactions and personal dignity.

Workplace Environment: The dynamics within the workplace, particularly the relationship with management, were crucial to job satisfaction. Supportive management was noted to significantly enhance the work environment, whereas strict or disrespectful management practices contributed to job dissatisfaction.

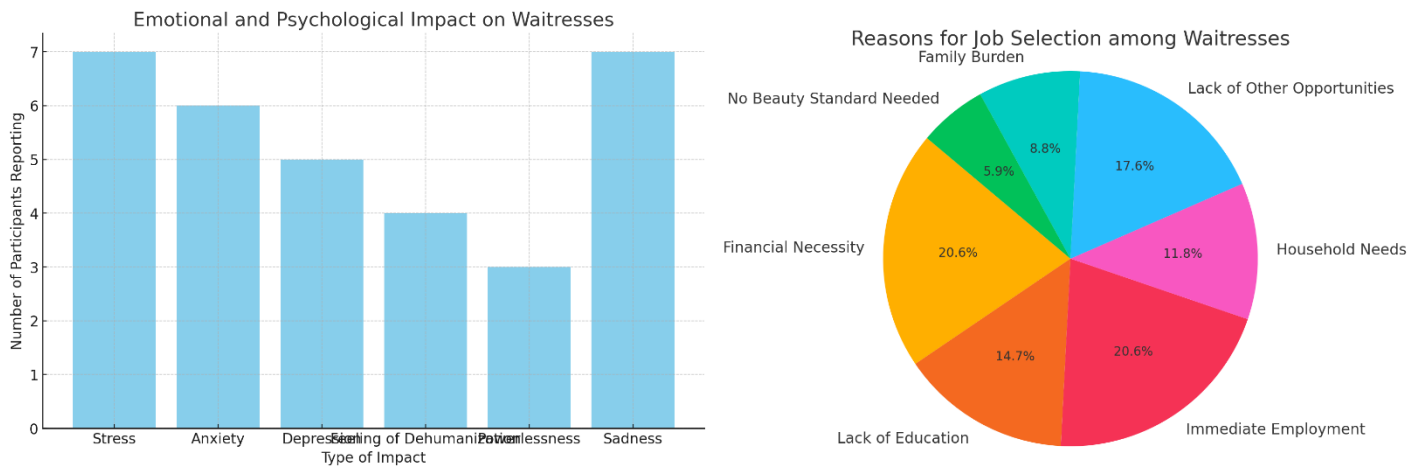
Job Satisfaction and Benefits: Despite the challenges, there were mixed feelings regarding job satisfaction. Some participants felt empowered by their ability to support their families and manage daily expenses, while others were disheartened by the societal disrespect and personal discomfort associated with their roles.

Coping Mechanisms: In facing these myriad challenges, participants employed various coping strategies, ranging from seeking social support to engaging in religious and personal reflective practices. These mechanisms were crucial for maintaining mental health and emotional resilience.

Table 1: Themes and Emergent Patterns in Job Selection and Workplace Experiences of Waitresses

Superordinate Theme	Master Theme	Emergent Themes
Job Selection	Motivation for Job Choice	Financial necessity, Lack of education requirement, Immediate employment, Household needs, Lack of other opportunities, Gratitude for employment, Unexpected burdens, Burden of family, Struggle to meet financial responsibility, Lack of financial support, No beauty standard needed, No other earning family member, Situational demand
	Family Influence	Siblings in the same profession, No family member in the profession, First in family to work as a waitress
	Family Support	Family concerned about social judgment, Lack of support, Financial necessity, No alternative support, Initial resistance eventual acceptance, Lack of acceptance about profession
Emotional and Psychological Impact	Job Feelings	Shame, Pride, Stress, Anxious, Insecure, Feeling of sadness, Want to skip work, Shouting of guest hurts, Uncomfortable environment, Negative impact on life, Feeling inferiority, Physical and verbal harassment, Treat like slaves, Gratitude, Disrespected, Feeling of upgradation of level compared to other jobs, Disturbed feeling

Superordinate Theme	Master Theme	Emergent Themes
	Mental Health Impact	Stress, Anxiety, Depression, Mentally ill, Burden on mind, Resilience, Feeling alone, Negative stares, Confusion, Stressed, Sadness, Sleep disturbance, Muscle stress, Repeated thoughts, Mental strain, Lack of sleep, Want to live alone, Depression, Helplessness, Shortness of breath
	Interpersonal Impact	Strained relationship, Isolation, Lack of interest in interpersonal life, Social pressure, Gender biasness, Lack of productive time with family, Increased isolation, Hectic or tired routine, Reduced family interaction, Lack of interest in personal life, Lack of support from family, Point at character
	Job Impact on Life	Social stigma, Empowerment, Facing challenges, Feeling overwhelmed, Feeling of dehumanization, Self-determined, Concerned about children's reputation, Distress, Disrespect, Uncertain marriage prospects, Embarrassment, Uncomfortable at job
	Social Problems	Challenges, Physical and verbal harassment, Disrespect, Financial exploitation, Social discrimination, Negative judgment of people, Avoidance of people, Inferiority feelings, Safety concerns, Emotional abuse, Physical exhaustion, Scolding behavior of manager
	Public Perception	Disrespect, Misunderstanding, Mixed reaction, Lack of support, Waitresses are like animals, Characterless, Inferior, Mixed perception, Conservative view, Gender biased
	Societal View	Negative societal view, Lack of respect, Stereotypes, Judgmental views, Disrespectful view, Ostentatious, Miser people, Negative perception, Inappropriate way of talking, Hurdles in married life, Considering waitresses as characterless
	Workplace Environment	Workplace Dynamic, Supportive colleagues, Rude customers, Professional environment, Management support, Negative stares, Ambivalence in people's behavior, Success in modernization, Overburden, Lack of appreciation, Forbade to give right, Feeling undervalued, Improper behavior
	Management Relationship	Supportive, Professional, Respectful, Strict behavior of boss, Delayed payments, Blame for delayed service, Perceived justice and unfair treatment
	Job Satisfaction	Gratification, Mixed feelings (satisfied and unsatisfied), Survival instinct, Satisfaction in busy life
	Job Benefits	Financial independence, Improved family conditions, Managing daily expenses, Survival, Improved confidence, Bravery, Meeting basic needs
	Coping Mechanism	Problem-solving strategies, Coping strategies, Seeking support, Ignoring issues, Catharsis, Crying, Religious support, Hoping for good opportunity, Patience, Sleeping pills, Seeking support, Relaxing by listening to songs



DISCUSSION

The findings of this study on the lived experiences of female waitresses in Pakistan revealed complex themes related to job selection, emotional and psychological impacts, social issues, workplace environment, job satisfaction, and coping mechanisms. The research underscores the significant challenges faced by these women, including physical and verbal harassment, monetary exploitation, and social discrimination. These issues are not isolated but reflect broader societal attitudes and the gendered nature of service work, which often labels waitresses in negative and dehumanizing ways, impacting their personal and professional lives (17, 18). The influence of family emerged as a significant factor, both as a motivator and a source of conflict. The necessity for financial independence drives many women into the service industry, despite the immediate and long-term psychological toll. This aligns with prior studies showing that urgent economic needs often overshadow the potential negative impacts of such jobs. The finding that physical attractiveness can affect tipping behavior further complicates the role of gender, adding an additional layer of complexity to the job satisfaction and economic stability of female waitresses (19).

Comparatively, existing literature highlights the prevalence of mental health issues among service workers, with stress, anxiety, and depression linked to poor sleep quality and job dissatisfaction. The current study supports these findings, adding a nuanced understanding of how societal perceptions and beauty standards play into the overall well-being of waitresses. The study's results point to a deeply entrenched stigma, where waitresses are not only marginalized but also subjected to conditions that foster mental health deterioration (20, 21). This study, however, is limited by its scope and generalizability. Conducted in the specific context of marriage halls in Lahore, the findings may not translate to other cultural or geographic settings where employment practices and societal norms differ. The small sample size and the focus on a specific employment setting also limit the ability to achieve data saturation, suggesting that further research is needed to explore these themes in broader contexts (22).

Future studies should aim to expand the demographic and geographic scope of research to include various types of hospitality settings and regions. It is also essential to examine the systemic and structural changes needed within the industry to improve the working conditions and societal perceptions of female waitresses. Addressing these challenges will require not only further academic inquiry but also policy interventions aimed at enhancing the dignity, safety, and well-being of women in the service industry (23). This research highlights the critical need for more comprehensive approaches to understanding and improving the work conditions of female waitresses in Pakistan, emphasizing the interplay of economic necessity, societal attitudes, and mental health challenges (12). The study highlights the need to tackle systemic issues like harassment, pay inequity, and limited career advancement for waitresses. It recommends fostering workplace equality through policies that ensure safe, confidential reporting and support channels. Training for restaurant managers and staff should promote respect, inclusivity, and gender sensitivity. Additionally, mental health support tailored to the unique challenges faced by female waitresses, including confidential counseling and stress management services, is essential to mitigate their mental health risks.

CONCLUSION

This study provides an insightful exploration into the lives of female waitresses in Pakistan, shedding light on the multifaceted challenges they face, including workplace harassment, emotional and psychological impacts, and societal stigma. It reveals how these factors interplay with family dynamics and personal aspirations, influencing job satisfaction and overall well-being. The findings underscore the urgent need for interventions that address the social and economic injustices faced by these women. By documenting the lived experiences of this marginalized group, the research highlights the critical importance of creating more supportive, respectful, and equitable work environments in the service industry. This contribution is vital for policymakers and stakeholders aiming to improve the working conditions and societal perceptions of female service workers, ultimately leading to enhanced mental health and job satisfaction.

Author Contribution

Author	Contribution
Afia Irfan*	Substantial Contribution to study design, analysis, acquisition of Data Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Shirmeen Ijaz	Substantial Contribution to study design, acquisition and interpretation of Data Critical Review and Manuscript Writing Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Sahar Tassahuq	Substantial Contribution to acquisition and interpretation of Data Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Iqra Imtiaz	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Maryiam Asghar	Contributed to Data Collection and Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published
Muhammad Bilal Arif	Substantial Contribution to study design and Data Analysis Has given Final Approval of the version to be published

REFERENCES

1. Micklitz HM, Nagel Z, Jahn S, Oertelt-Prigione S, Andersson G, Sander LB. Digital self-help for people experiencing intimate partner violence: a qualitative study on user experiences and needs including people with lived experiences and services providers. *BMC public health*. 2023;23(1):1471.
2. Mattsson E, Lindblad M, Kneck Å, Salzmänn-Eriksson M, Klarare A, Health WABfI. Voices of women in homelessness during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic: a co-created qualitative study. *BMC Women's Health*. 2023;23(1):11.
3. Worke MD, Demelash H, Meseret L, Bezie M, Abebe F. Factors associated with sexual violence among waitresses working in Bahir Dar City, Ethiopia: a mixed-method study. *BMC women's health*. 2022;22(1):209.
4. Watharow A, Wayland S. Making qualitative research inclusive: Methodological insights in disability research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 2022;21:16094069221095316.

5. Razzak B, Blackburn R, Saridakis G. Employees' working life and performance of UK ethnic minority restaurants: a qualitative approach. *Benchmarking: An International Journal*. 2022;29(1):47-67.
6. Pustinger L, Burchill CN, Stetz K, Distelhorst KS. Exploring the Lived Experience of Families Waiting for Surgical Patients: A Qualitative Study. *AORN journal*. 2022;116(1):34-44.
7. Mefteh KY, Mulugeta GM, Teshome WL. The Lived Experience of Waitresses in Hospitality Sector: A Phenomenological Study on Work Related Abuse and its Coping Mechanisms among Selected Waitresses in Hospitality Sector in Bahirdar City, Northwestern Ethiopia. *Qualitative Report*. 2022;27(6).
8. Levi P, Moss J. Intensive care unit nurses' lived experiences of psychological stress and trauma caring for COVID-19 patients. *Workplace health & safety*. 2022;70(8):358-67.
9. Kneck Å, Klarare A, Mattsson E, Salzman-Erikson M, Health WABfl. Reflections on health among women in homelessness: A qualitative study. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*. 2022;29(5):709-20.
10. Zewude B, Habtegiorgis T. Victimization and surviving of workplace violence against waitresses in southern Ethiopia. *Plos one*. 2021;16(12):e0261883.
11. Worke MD, Koricha ZB, Debelew GT. Perception and experiences of sexual harassment among women working in hospitality workplaces of Bahir Dar city, Northwest Ethiopia: a qualitative study. *BMC Public Health*. 2021;21(1):1119.
12. Worke MD, Koricha ZB, Debelew GT. Coping strategies and perceived barriers of women hospitality workplace employees to sexual harassment in Bahir Dar city, Ethiopia: a grounded theory approach. *BMC psychology*. 2021;9:1-14.
13. McKinlay AR, Fancourt D, Burton A. A qualitative study about the mental health and wellbeing of older adults in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMC geriatrics*. 2021;21:1-10.
14. Lippert JF, Furnari MB, Kriebel CW. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on occupational stress in restaurant work: a qualitative study. *International journal of environmental research and public health*. 2021;18(19):10378.
15. Kneck Å, Mattsson E, Salzman-Erikson M, Klarare A. "Stripped of dignity"—Women in homelessness and their perspectives of healthcare services: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*. 2021;120:103974.
16. Jerez-Jerez MJ, Melewar T, Foroudi P. Exploring waiters' occupational identity and turnover intention: A qualitative study focusing on Michelin-starred restaurants in London. *Journal of hospitality and tourism management*. 2021;47:22-34.
17. Ho YF, Chen YC, Li IC. A qualitative study on shared decision-making of patients with chronic kidney disease. *Nursing Open*. 2021;8(6):3430-40.
18. Grailey K, Lound A, Brett S. Lived experiences of healthcare workers on the front line during the COVID-19 pandemic: a qualitative interview study. *BMJ open*. 2021;11(12):e053680.
19. Curtis MG, D'Aniello C, Twist ML, Brents BG, Eddy B. 'We are naked waitresses who deliver sex': a phenomenological study of circumstantial sex workers' lives. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*. 2021;36(4):438-64.
20. Carroll DE, Stephens CA, Stripling CT, Sorochan JC, Brosnan JT. Women in Turf: A Qualitative Study Examining How Women Have Sustained Their Leadership Role in the Turfgrass Industry. *Journal of Agricultural Education*. 2021;62(4):139-57.
21. Ponting C, Delgadillo D, Rivera-Olmedo N, Yarris KE. A qualitative analysis of gendered experiences of schizophrenia in an outpatient psychiatric hospital in Mexico. *International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation*. 2020;9(3):159.
22. Miller A. Development through vocational education. The lived experiences of young people at a vocational education, training restaurant in Siem Reap, Cambodia. *Heliyon*. 2020;6(12).
23. Jerez-Jerez M, Melewar T. The consequence of waiters' professional identity on passion for work and its effects on employee turnover: a qualitative approach. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*. 2020;23(4):767-95.