

**Negotiating Patriarchy in Public: Women-Only Spaces as Sites of Resistance and
Reproduction in Pakistan**

by

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Abstract

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Master of Arts in Global Studies

Title: Negotiating Patriarchy in Public: Women-Only Spaces as Sites of Resistance and Reproduction in Pakistan

This thesis examines women-only public spaces, particularly parks and transportation, in a conservative urban context of Peshawar, Pakistan, through the lens of urbanism, gender, and development. It moves beyond mainstream approaches that frame women's empowerment in instrumentalist and colonial frames, emphasizing instead the sociocultural, spatial, and everyday dimensions of empowerment and agency. Drawing on numerous discourses, including empowerment and agency, decolonial development, feminist geography, urban placemaking, spatiality, etc., the study explores women's access and mobility in public spaces frequently shaped by patriarchal norms, and highlights how women express agency and seek well-being within and beyond these boundaries. The research indicates that women-only spaces can offer safety, a sense of belonging, and autonomy, while also reflecting, reimagining, and renegotiating existing social and patriarchal power dynamics hierarchies. Overall, the study posits empowerment as an ongoing, relational, and situated process shaped by space, culture, and intersectional experiences.

Keywords: Decolonial Development, Gender and Development, Feminist Urban Placemaking, Women's Empowerment, Intersectionality, Gender Segregation, Agency, Women-Only Spaces

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Dedication

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List of Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
BRT	Bus Rapid Transit
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GAD	Gender and Development
HRCP	Human Rights Commission of Pakistan
KP	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non-Government Organization, a.k.a. Nonprofit Organization
NCHR	National Commission for Human Rights
NDSP	National Diabetes Survey of Pakistan
PBS	Pakistan Bureau of Statistics
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
Res	Researcher
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SGD	Small Group Discussion
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UN-Habitat	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WID	Women in Development
WAD	Women and Development
WOPS	Women-Only Public Spaces

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and Statement of Problem

Across the globe, women's access to the public sphere and participation in development remain shaped by international, national, and local gendered power relations. Fields like urban theory and feminist geography argue that space is not neutral but socially produced, often reinforcing patriarchal divisions that privilege men's presence in public life while largely confining women to the private or domestic sphere. In many societies where conservatism and patriarchy are prevalent, women's accessibility to public spaces are shaped by a mix of existing cultural norms, societal expectations, and concerns about honor and safety; these constraints reinforce and reproduce separations between public and private realms, impacting women's freedom of movement, economic activity, and participation in social life (Mernissi, 1975; Massey, 1994). As a result, these exclusions also impact their psychological well-being (Chant & Datu, 2011) and internalized experiences of empowerment and agency. Historically, modernist development agendas that shape urban planning and infrastructure have failed to consider the differences in unique, culturally-sensitive gendered realities, i.e., the practical and strategic gender needs of women and other marginalized groups in society, often producing and reproducing environments intended primarily to benefit men (Hayden, 1980; Criado-Perez, 2019); this structural oversight leads to gaps in accessibility, mobility, and opportunities. In countries like Pakistan, these gaps are further complicated by class and economic barriers, resulting in many women relying on male family members for transportation and being denied access to education, employment, and recreation.

The modern emergence of planned women-only public spaces (WOPS) around the world has been one means of addressing these societal challenges. Examples of these include the sites in focus for this research, women-only parks and buses in Peshawar, Pakistan, but also other similar initiatives, such as women-only transportation services in other Pakistani cities like Lahore and Karachi, along with efforts in countries like Egypt, India, Mexico, and Japan (Horii & Burgess, 2012; Dunckel-Graglia, 2013), and separate parks for women in United Arab Emirates, Iran and India (Shahrokni, 2014; Karmakar, 2023). Other examples of such spaces include gender-segregated markets, educational institutions, recreational areas, etc. For many women, these spaces offer opportunities that would otherwise be difficult to experience within the domestic realm, as they can benefit from enhanced relaxation, expanded solidarity, and improved well-being within safe spaces.

Yet, such interventions still raise debates on their efficacy, with critics arguing that these spaces designed exclusively for women may reinforce segregation and legitimize existing patriarchal hierarchies (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Butler, 1997; Mohanty, 1984), reinforcing the idea that women are essentially vulnerable and in need of more protection, rather than addressing the larger issues at play. Others consider these interventions as temporary solutions, i.e., short-term safeguards that slowly expand women's choices and agency within constrained contexts (Kabeer, 1994; Kandiyoti, 1988). This duality outlines the main tension surrounding these spaces: they are simultaneously protective and restrictive. In Pakistan, and in Peshawar more specifically, where gender roles and male dominance are prevalent, it is crucial to understand how women perceive these spaces, whether as places of liberation, sites of negotiation, or reminders of constraints, and what implications this holds for empowerment and gender equality in conservative urban settings.

To address these debates and tensions, this study takes a women-centric approach to the collection and framing of data, focusing on the lived experiences of women who use women-only parks and buses in Peshawar, situating these sites within a wider global and feminist discussion of gender, segregation, and urban development. By prioritizing how women themselves describe the opportunities, challenges, and meanings of these spaces, along with the perspectives of female experts interacting with the broader development sector in Peshawar and Pakistan, the research aims to move beyond abstract critiques and interpretations to ground the data and analysis in lived realities instead. In doing so, it contributes to closing the gap between the theoretical and structural debates on segregation and the lived perspectives of women navigating these spaces in conservative contexts like Peshawar.

Researcher Positionality

My positionality within the context of this research is crucial to acknowledge, given its influence on the trajectory of this research, the research instruments that I developed, and the way I transcribed and interpreted the data with cultural nuance and familiarity.

The early years of my life were spent growing up in various military cantonment areas across six different cities and three provinces of Pakistan, due to my father's service in the army. This meant that a majority of my childhood was spent in highly regulated and well-resourced enclaves, characterized by and known for their safety, cleanliness, and infrastructural investments that facilitated equitable resource allocation, mobility, and accessibility for both men and women. These cantonments could be described as “bubbles,” often located within larger cities but seemingly disconnected and unimpacted by outside socio-cultural norms that dictated life beyond the boundary. Within this “bubble,” women were visible in public spaces, able to

exercise agency in the way they utilized resources to expand their opportunities, accessibility, and mobility. This safety and visibility meant that I, as a girl, could go outside, loiter, participate in recreational activities like sports, and move around freely at my own discretion. Until the age of twelve, I enjoyed what could be described as a protected and empowering environment, one where women's participation in public life was normalized, encouraged, and taken for granted simultaneously. While existing within the bubble, I also had numerous opportunities to engage with city life outside of the cantonments, including frequenting marketplaces and attending schools, etc. Not only did that become a point for comparison between the different intersectional embodiments and configurations of space within the same city, but moving between different cities also enabled me to observe various cultural dynamics and how occupying space within those social contexts impacted my own ability to navigate them.

These expanded privileges diminished drastically when my father retired, and we returned to my family's hometown of Peshawar. The stark contrast between the cantonment and the city itself left a lasting impression on me. Unlike the gender-inclusive environment I had known, in Peshawar's urban spaces, women were largely invisible. Their presence in public was restricted to a few socially acceptable spaces, such as *bazaars* (marketplaces) for clothing or household shopping. Leisure and recreational facilities for women were practically non-existent, meaning I could no longer pursue sports or activities like cycling and jogging. Even walking outside my own house was discouraged due to safety concerns and the fact that it was discouraged socially. Public transport was limited, unsafe, and dominated by men, which made independent mobility extremely difficult for women. My life shifted from constant socializing in outdoor spaces to one confined mainly to the home, with limited interaction outside of school or college. Even within this restrictive environment, I must acknowledge my privilege. I belonged

to a relatively progressive family that valued education and did not impose as many restrictions on me as others might have. This progressive stance, combined with middle-class resources, made my mobility somewhat easier compared to women who lacked affordability or familial permission. However, despite these relative advantages, my own mobility and access rights remained sharply curtailed. This duality, privileged in some respects but still deeply constrained, has profoundly shaped my sensitivity to questions of gender, mobility, and empowerment.

I also personally accessed women-only parks in Peshawar, particularly when I wanted relief from the male gaze. These parks offered my friends and me a rare opportunity to move freely, run, or exercise without fear of judgment or harassment. For instance, while jogging in a mixed park might be deemed immodest and invite reprimand, women-only parks provided a space of relative autonomy. These embodied experiences and cultural exposure sharpened my awareness of how segregated spaces simultaneously enable empowerment and reflect broader gendered constraints.

My professional background has also informed my approach. During my undergraduate studies and after graduation, I worked with think tanks, consultancies, and NGOs on projects that involved both field and telephonic data collection across diverse regions of Pakistan. I interacted with women of varying ages, socio-economic classes, educational levels, and degrees of urbanity and conservatism. These experiences gave me the skills to establish rapport with participants in sensitive contexts and to navigate cultural differences with care. At the same time, I also encountered resistance; on several occasions, I was dismissed or turned away because I was perceived as an “NGO woman,” a term often used in Pakistan to denote suspicion of outsiders and development workers, who are seen as pushing foreign agendas or prying into private family matters (Bano, 2008). These experiences taught me the importance of transparency and

reflexivity. In my thesis fieldwork, I drew on this awareness by foregrounding aspects of my positionality that aligned with participants' realities, elaborating on the study's purpose, and creating a safe and non-judgmental space for them to share their experiences.

At the same time, I acknowledge the cultural limitations of my research context. In Peshawar, discussing personal aspects of life, particularly those related to family dynamics, values, or intimate experiences, is not customary. This reservation likely meant that during the data collection process and interviews, many deeper layers of women's motivations and strategies remained unspoken and unexplored due to the one-off nature of the interviews; a more longitudinal ethnographic study might have uncovered these subtleties. However, given the scope of this study, my data often remained at the surface level of what participants felt comfortable disclosing in a single interaction.

Ultimately, my life trajectory, i.e., moving from the relative freedom of cantonment spaces to the restrictions of Peshawar, developed in me a personal understanding of the importance of mobility and accessibility for women. These contrasting experiences motivated me to explore WOPS as both an immediate coping mechanism and as a site for analyzing broader structural gender inequalities. They also made me attentive to strategies of empowerment that operate at both the micro-level of everyday negotiations and the macro-level of policy and infrastructure. My positionality, therefore, is not a bias or weakness to be erased but a deeper level of insight that continually shaped how I engaged with participants, analyzed data, and conceptualized empowerment in the Pakistani urban context.

Research Questions

1. What motivates women to access and utilize women-only public spaces (WOPS) in conservative urban settings, what meanings do they associate with these spaces, and what are the perceived benefits and challenges of these spaces as described by their users?
2. How do women-only public spaces (WOPS) in conservative urban settings contribute to women's well-being, empowerment, and agency?
3. In what ways do women-only public spaces (WOPS) challenge or reinforce existing patriarchal norms and social structures?

Research Objectives

1. To explore the motivations that lead women to access and utilize women-only public spaces (WOPS) in conservative urban contexts, and to understand the meanings, perceived benefits, and challenges these spaces hold for their users.
2. To examine the role of women-only public spaces (WOPS) in shaping women's well-being, empowerment, and forms of agency, focusing on how these spaces influence their everyday lived experiences.
3. To analyze the extent to which women-only public spaces (WOPS) contest, negotiate, or reproduce existing patriarchal norms and social structures within conservative urban environments.

Research Plan

To address the research questions and objectives, this study employed a grounded theory methodology with a mixed-methods approach for the collection and analysis of data, combining

quantitative and qualitative data. The research was conducted in Peshawar, Pakistan, with a focus on two types of WOPS: parks (Khyber Park and Ladies' Park) and buses (Bus Rapid Transit buses and terminals/stations). These sites were selected because they are some of the most visible and frequented women-only initiatives in the city, offering opportunities for recreation, socialization, and mobility.

All data collection instruments were developed in three languages: English, Urdu, and Pashto, keeping in mind the language variability of the research site, i.e., Peshawar, Pakistan. The collection of data was conducted through: two structured surveys (park users and bus users) to capture larger patterns of usage, perspectives, and relevant demographic information; semi-structured interviews with women present in the parks through both small-group discussions and individual interviews to gather in-depth perspectives; two focus group discussions, one serving as the pilot for the semi-structured interviews and one after, to refine and reflect on emergent themes; expert interviews with an academic and local development practitioner to provide further context and interpretation of WOPS, and holistic explanations for the development and gender landscape surrounding the lived realities of women in Peshawar; and, finally, participant observations conducted directly at one women-only park and one mixed-gender park in Peshawar to record observable content and provide a potential base for comparative realities of the two spaces.

By approaching the data collection and analysis process through a grounded theory approach allowed the findings and themes to emerge inductively from women's own narratives rather than imposing a rigid, predefined thematic framework or categories. By iteratively coding and analyzing the data, patterns of meanings, empowerment, agency, well-being, patriarchy, etc., emerged that might have otherwise been uncategorized. My positionality as a Pakistani, *Pakhtun*

(ethnicity largely populated in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where Peshawar is located) woman and a researcher influenced both access to the field, communication with the research participants, and interpretation of the findings; it established increased rapport and trust with participants, while also required reflexivity to ensure that my own perspectives did not overshadow the input of the women, whose experiences are the prime focus of this study.

Scope of the Study

Selection of Site

Peshawar, Pakistan. My positionality strongly influenced my choice of Pakistan as the primary country for this research. As a native of Pakistan with an intimate understanding of its social dynamics after having lived in various cities across the country, I possess the necessary cultural and linguistic skills to engage effectively with local communities. This positionality enhances the research's validity, ensuring the data collected is accurate and contextually relevant. This proximity to the culture and language also allowed me to establish trust and rapport with the women in these communities, which proved to be critical for conducting in-depth qualitative research.

Country context. Pakistan is a lower-middle-income country with an estimated population of around 251 million (2024), going through rapid demographic and urban transitions; with an urban share of the country being 1/3 of the population and rising, this rapid urbanization necessitates questions of mobility, safety, resilience, and inclusive planning in cities (World Bank Group, 2025). According to the Human Development Report 2023/2024, published by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Pakistan is categorized as a “low human development” country, with a Human Development Index value of 0.540 and a rank of 164/193

(UNDP, 2024). Gender inequality continues to be an issue, with the World Economic Forum's 2025 Global Gender Gap Report placing Pakistan last among 148 countries (gender parity ~56.7%) due to persistent gaps in economic participation and output, education, health, and political involvement (World Economic Forum, 2025). In terms of Global Gender Gap ranking, Pakistan is placed at 153/156, among the lowest in the world. The female adult literacy rate (age 15+) stands at 46% (World Bank Group, 2025), with a labor force participation rate of only 24% and a gender parity index of 34.7% in Economic Participation and Opportunity (UNDP, 2025). The aggregation of these indicators showcases why women's everyday access to public life is uneven and why spatial interventions such as women-only parks and buses have become policy strategies.

Historical and political evolution of gender and development. The trajectory of women's rights development has been impacted by Pakistan's tremulous phases and stages of political reform and regression. Following independence in 1947, leaders such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah anticipated a significant role for women, with early representatives like Fatima Jinnah showcasing their presence in public affairs. However, the financial state of early populations, the turbulent transitional conditions of various locales due to the recent partition with India, and societal patriarchal norms mainly limited involvement to affluent urban families. Female political participation has historically been low, especially during the early years of Pakistan's political development, but was steadily improving. A major turning point came under the dictator, General Zia-ul-Haq, whose Islamization policies drastically curtailed women's rights. The Hudood Ordinances of 1979 criminalized extra-marital sex and blurred the distinction between rape and adultery, setting a dangerous precedent and exposing women to wrongful imprisonment and stigma (Jahangir & Jilani, 1990). In response to these ordinances, the

Women's Action Forum (WAF) was formed in 1981 by activists and lawyers Asma Jehangir and Hina Jinali, who led protests and legal advocacy that set the foundation for feminist mobilization in Pakistan (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987).

After the overthrow of the dictatorship and reintroduction of democracy into the political sphere, governments of the 1980s and 1990s created opportunities for the expansion of women's rights. Benazir Bhutto became the first woman prime minister of the Muslim World in 1988, and women's reserved seats in the parliamentary bodies were formalized. Further women's rights organizations emerged, like Aurat Foundation and Shirkat Gah, that expanded advocacy for education, health, and legal reforms. Despite steps like these, fundamentalist parties and groups continued to denounce women's rights movements as Western influences and un-Islamic (Bano, 2008). This democratic era came to an end with the military takeover of General Pervaiz Musharraf's regime (1999-2008), but women's rights continued to expand. His regime introduced reforms like the Protection of Women Act (2006), which amended the Hudood laws, moving rape trials back to civil courts and changing the modalities to reduce their detrimental applications. However, running parallel to the War on Terror in Afghanistan, Pakistan continued to suffer by proximity, with extremist groups and organizations like Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP), who concentrated their influences in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), targeting girls' education and schooling, threatening women NGO workers, and informally "Islamizing" the social fabric of these areas (Weiss, 2007, 2014). This tension arises from the disparity between the traditional idea and expectations of women's responsibilities and roles within society, which are starkly at odds with the advocacy efforts of human rights and women's rights movements.

From 2008 onwards, successive democratic governments passed landmark laws: the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act (2010), the Acid Control and Acid Crime Prevention Act (2011), the Prevention of Anti-Women Practices Act (2011), and the Anti-Honor Killing Law (2016) (Shirkat Gah, 2017). Implementation, however, remains inconsistent, with an estimated 1,500+ honor killings between 2020-2023 (Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). Prominent figures like Malala Yousafzai have highlighted the paradox of Pakistan's gender politics; their efforts are applauded globally, yet often criticized domestically by conservative and fundamentalist groups for spreading "Western" rhetoric (Sahar, 2022).

In recent years, Aurat March Pakistan (2018) has revived large-scale feminist activism in Pakistan. Through their various advocacy and social movement efforts, attention is being brought to issues such as reproductive rights, education, health, and safety. Slogans like "*Mera jism, meri marzi*" (my body, my choice) have sparked heated debates, vilified by conservative groups as immoral and socially detrimental, while celebrated by younger, urban feminists (Abbas et al., 2025).

Regional and intercultural differences. Gender norms and women's access to public space vary significantly across Pakistan. Cities like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad have higher female literacy, employment, and mobility, often supported by stronger civil society networks and more liberal urban cultures (Weiss, 2014). By contrast, Peshawar and Quetta are marked by conservative social fabrics where women's public presence is limited and often scrutinized. However, remote areas like Chitral and Gilgit-Baltistan defy stereotypes, with relatively high female literacy and cultural acceptance of women's education and mobility (Sathar, 2000). This uneven dispersion of rights and liberties across various geographies showcases that gender

development in Pakistan is not monolithic but deeply contextual and influenced by turbulent socio-political factors.

Social Context. Beyond the political and legislative makeup and history of Pakistan, its social fabric remains deeply communal and collective in orientation. Extended family systems, both patriarchal and matriarchal in nature, remain central to society's functioning, how roles are embodied and performed, and the way rights and liberties are practiced. Joint family households are especially dominant in rural areas, often with multiple generations under one roof; this trend, however, is also found in urban areas, with the joint and extended-joint families making up a larger chunk of household composition. Decisions regarding marriage, education, mobility, and women's participation in public life are frequently negotiated within family and community rather than at the autonomous, individual level. This collectivism provides kinship-based support networks but also reinforces patriarchal authority, where women's choices and liberties are often subject to approval from male family members like fathers, husbands, brothers, and even senior women within the households, like mothers-in-law, etc.

Religiously, Pakistan is overwhelmingly Muslim: about 96% of the population identifies as Muslim, with Sunni Islam the majority and Shi'a communities making up 10–15%. Smaller minorities include Christians, Hindus, Ahmadis, and others (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Religious affiliation frequently intersects with cultural and political norms to reform and reinforce gender expectations, particularly through religio-cultural concepts of *pardah* (female seclusion) and *izzat/ghairat* (honor), which dictate women's visibility, access, and conduct in public. While these practices are more prevalent and strict in provinces like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan, they are less strictly enforced in urban Punjab and Sindh due to various other intersecting factors, such as literacy and economic standing; household incomes

reflect this divide, with the average monthly household income in urban Pakistan being nearly double that of rural households (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023).

These intersectional factors continue to complicate women's lived realities, with the Pakistan Social and Living Standards Measurement (PSLM) survey 2022-2023 reporting that around 64% of Pakistan's population still lives in rural areas, with rural women experiencing more restrictions on education and access to health than their urban counterparts. Larger metropolitan urban centers, such as Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad, provide more opportunities for women's education and labor market participation, while women in Quetta or Peshawar face stronger cultural barriers. These disparities provide an explanation for the uneven gendered opportunities, with affluent urban women often able to access private schools, cars, public spaces, and employment networks, while poorer women remain dependent on public transportation and often require male permission to navigate public life and access the wider societal sphere. However, despite patriarchal dominance within Pakistan, exceptions to the norm exist: in certain more remote northern areas like Gilgit-Baltistan and Chitral, women's literacy rates surpass national averages due to long-standing investments in community-based schooling, efforts often undertaken by organizations like the Aga Khan Development Network.

Taken together, Pakistan's social context is one of paradoxes: a communal culture that provides solidarity but polices women's autonomy, a religious majority whose interpretations of modesty often limit mobility, and an economy whose sharp rural-urban and class divides intensify gender inequalities. These complexities can help explain why interventions like women-only parks and buses must be understood within broader social frameworks of kinship, class, religion, and community, rather than being viewed as neutral policy solutions.

Why Peshawar. Peshawar, the provincial Capital of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), is one of South Asia and Pakistan's oldest continuously inhabited cities, historically positioned as a key trade route in the region. Currently, Peshawar serves as an important urban access point for the relatively underdeveloped and war-impacted Northwest region of Pakistan. According to the latest census, the district of Peshawar has a population of around 4.76 million (2023) and an average household size of 6.88, a sharper increase from previous calculations, suggesting rapid growth, urbanization, and high population density (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2023). The city's conservative social fabric is shaped by various socio-cultural and political factors, the primary ones being: the Pashtun cultural code called *Pakhtunwali*, where gendered expectations around *purdah/ghairat* (modesty/honor) strongly influence women's visibility, mobility, and participation outside of the domestic unit; and the War on Terror, which significantly impacted Peshawar due to its proximity, resulting in slower economic, social and political progress (Malik et al., 2019). This has further entrenched patriarchal norms, resulting in an amalgamation of religion and culture, used detrimentally by men in positions of power. Census and development reports show that girls' schooling and women's public participation are influenced by these norms, with KP historically performing relatively weaker as compared to other provinces like Punjab and Sindh (Jamal, 2015; M. W. Khalid et al., 2020)

Recent human rights reports from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have drawn attention to a concerning increase in gender-based violence and shortcomings in the institutions tasked with ensuring protection and accountability. The 2025 annual report from the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan highlighted a significant rise in violence against women and children, pointing to problems like domestic abuse, sexual assaults, and honor killings in the province. The report also stressed the ongoing inadequacies within the accountability mechanisms of local law

enforcement (Dawn, 2025). In Peshawar and KP more widely, coverage of the HRCP report also highlighted surging militant violence, gender-based crimes, and governance deficits, including the failure of courts and police interventions to respond to rising women's rights issues. The Annual Report 2024 by Pakistan's National Commission for Human Rights reports that honor killing cases remain prevalent within the province, and that many women's abuse cases face barriers in reporting or prosecution, like refusal of judges to proceed or lack of witness protection (National Commission for Human Rights Pakistan, 2023).

Peshawar's combination of conservative gender norms, high urban pressures, and unique gender-responsive interventions like women-only parks and bus compartments makes it a significant site to examine whether WOPS operate as protective, enabling, and/or constraining mechanisms. Situated within an urban context that offers versatility and diversity in population, infrastructure, and socio-cultural dynamics, Peshawar offers rich intersectional data for analysis against the topic of this research. This also facilitates in exploring how class, education, and household power dynamics interact with public spatial design to shape women's participation, and to assess the functionality of these interventions as transformative measures towards more equitable growth or renormalizing segregation and separation.

Selection of Context

The selection of parks and buses as primary data collection sites in this research is strategic and multifaceted. By focusing on these two distinct yet complementary sites, the research aims to analyze how WOPS contribute to women's empowerment and well-being in both static and dynamic urban settings.

Parks. Parks, as open public spaces, provide a critical context for examining how WOPS can foster social connectivity, physical activity, and a sense of safety and autonomy among women. Studies have shown that access to safe public spaces is vital for women's psychological well-being and social engagement (R. Lewis et al., 2015), particularly in conservative societies where public harassment and gender-based violence are prevalent (Karmaliani et al., 2012).

Buses. Public transportation systems, e.g., buses, are integral to understanding women's mobility in urban settings. Gender-segregated buses in cities like Peshawar provide a unique lens to explore how transport segregation can enhance women's access to education, employment, and other public services (PATIMES, 2018).

Research Overview

This thesis is structured to build iteratively through the data collected from the sites, framing it within the broader theoretical debates about gender, space, and development.

Chapter 2 provides the literature review, tracing the historical evolution of gendered spaces, introduces key theoretical frameworks such as specialty, empowerment, agency, and patriarchy, and gives context through global case studies of WOPS. The chapter also discusses contested debates around segregation versus integration and intersectionality within the larger feminist and development discourses.

Chapter 3 discusses methodology and research design. It explains the research design by explaining the rationale for adopting a mixed-methods approach and the influence of a grounded theory framework, details about the sites of research (women-only parks and buses in Peshawar), and reflections on positionality, ethics, and limitations.

Chapter 4 presents the findings, drawing on surveys, interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observations. The chapter outlines patterns of usage, women's motivations, statistical analysis of intersectional data like age, income, convenience, etc., meanings and benefits women associate with WOPS, including empowerment, well-being, and agency.

Chapter 5 discusses how WOPS both enable and constrain participation, focusing on major barriers to access and mobility, including larger structural and institutional hurdles, and restrictive influences of patriarchal social and cultural norms that shape these experiences. The chapter also considers critiques and limitations, situating WOPS as sites of negotiation between protection and empowerment.

Chapter 6 concludes the thesis. It first outlines the way forward by drawing on women's perspectives, expert insights, and theory. It highlights how WOPS risk perpetuating exclusion even while they offer temporary protection and agency. From enhancing everyday agency to enhancing accessibility and infrastructure, the conversation shifts to normalizing women's participation in all facets of public life. Moreover, it summarizes the key contributions of the study, reflects on its implications for theory and practice, and offers recommendations for urban planning, gender-responsive development, and future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The literature on gender and public space highlights how spatial dynamics often reflect and reproduce wider power structures. In many conservative contexts, the social norms rooted in patriarchal structuring reinforce a dichotomous public-private separation that shapes and impacts women's mobility, safety, and participation in public life (Valentine, 2007). As a response to this, various modern interventions have emerged designed to mitigate issues of insecurity and expand opportunities for women's existence in the public sphere, a prominent one being women-only public spaces (WOPS), ranging from parks and transportation systems to recreational facilities and community networks (Phadke et al., 2011). These spaces not only provide protection but they also carry potential to enhance empowerment, solidarity, and forms of agency that challenge measures of symbolic and social control (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Concurrently, the creation and existence of WOPS raise debates within feminist and development scholarship about the meanings of their existence and their potential for change. On the one hand, they are viewed as empowering spaces that enable participation that would have otherwise been denied or nonexistent; on the other hand, others criticize them as spaces that reinforce segregation and limit broader struggles for integration and equality (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 2003). This tension causes WOPS to exist as a major point of contention, placing them at the intersection of empowerment and exclusion, protection and marginalization.

This chapter engages with these debates and relevant literature by exploring their historical evolution, examining key theoretical frameworks, and reviewing global typologies and

case studies within the broader context of development and urban planning. By approaching it from a transdisciplinary lens, insights from gender studies, feminist geography, sociology, and postcolonial theory have been adopted into the understanding of this research area, enriching the analysis emerging from various data points.

Historical Context and Evolution of Gendered Spaces

The idea of gender segregation appears repeatedly in history, stemming from social, cultural, and economic factors that have appointed roles, responsibilities, and spaces for men and women. Gender segregation within public spaces, thus, is not a recent phenomenon but is deeply influenced by historical practices, cultural traditions, and religious injunctions across both Western and non-Western societies. As Massey (1994) emphasizes, space is not a neutral existence but a social construct that reflects and reproduces existing power relations. Likewise, Rose (1993) also highlights that spatial division into public and private has historically been used as a means by which patriarchal power has been maintained and sustained. Examples of this can be found within Western contexts as well, including Victorian England, where the separation of public amenities and the separation within domestic and leisure spaces, also sometimes referred to as “separate spheres,” were designed based on gendered ideas and practices of modesty and propriety, keeping women primarily in the private sphere.

Non-Western contexts also formalized gendered divisions of space; however, the logic being around prescriptions of modesty and controlled gender interactions in private and public domains; and while such arrangements may appear similar to Western “separate spheres,” their cultural meanings and practices diverge significantly, as they are refracted through religious injunctions, values of honor, and localized socio-cultural and political realities. As Mir-Hosseini

(2006) points out, Islamic legal and cultural frameworks construct gendered spatial divisions not merely as restrictions but as embedded within broader discourses of morality, family honor, and social order, which makes them distinct in both intent and lived experience compared to Western historical forms of segregation. Mernissi (1987) further explains how these divisions are not only cultural but also a means of social regulation through which patriarchal influences and authority trickle down into the spatial organization of everyday life, thereby regulating power. These arrangements and dynamics are often essentialized in Western feminist discourses, painting all such appearances as requiring the same strategies used under Western developmental paradigms, and the women regulated under it as a “single monolithic entity” (Mohanty, 1984); this often results in the failure to recognize women’s own strategies of navigating power (Abu-Lughod, 2002) and negotiations with the patriarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988) that need recognition and acknowledgement as localized and culturally-sensitive interventions of gender, morality and power, so to avoid ethnocentric interpretations.

Further complexities to interactions between gender and space were introduced through colonial and postcolonial periods; these regimes frequently imposed Western urban development models, like grid-based planning and European-style public institutional arrangements, which were contrary to the naturally occurring patterns of social interactions in indigenous and local populations, creating and reinforcing new hierarchies of exclusions. In colonized cities, women frequently experienced double marginalization because of both: being restricted by patriarchal norms and excluded by imported, exclusionary urban planning paradigms. Mohanty (2003) emphasizes that colonial modernity reshaped gendered access to space by giving preference to male mobility, labor, and visibility, yet similarly still warns against generalizing such experiences. These unequal spatial dynamics were passed down to postcolonial states, forcing

them to continually negotiate the tension between adopting developmentalist planning frameworks influenced by modernist discourses and reclaiming traditional social patterns of existence.

With the advent of globalization, gendered spaces, roles, and responsibilities further transformed in the late 20th century. Women's growing involvement in the labor force, politics, and education began to challenge historical systems of exclusions, which also gave rise to resulting concerns about harassment, safety, and access to public life that had largely been governed by men.

Gendered spaces were further transformed in the late 20th century with the advent of globalization and increased urbanization. Concerns about harassment, safety, and access to public life became more pressing as women's growing involvement in political activities, the workforce, and education challenged historical exclusions (Chant & Datu, 2015). Eventually, through global governance entities, women's right to the city became an international policy mandate due to feminist intervention and advocacy like the Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), and Gender and Development (GAD) movements (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Parpart et al., 2002; Sharp et al., 2003), and through development agendas like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Leal Filho et al., 2023; Momsen, 2020), especially those centered on urban equity and empowerment. The UN-Habitat (2012) report stated, "In many cultures, women are excluded from public spaces or self-exclude due to concerns about their safety and security" (p.46). Women-only carriages in South Asian and Middle Eastern transportation systems (Arundhathi, 2024; Tillous, 2020), women-only parks in Iran and Pakistan (Shahrokni, 2014; Shirvani, 2017), and feminist safe spaces in Europe and North America (R. Lewis et al., 2015) are all examples of hybrid

interventions that resulted from the intersection of these discourses with local struggles. Similar to the discussions of previous authors about the dual nature of these spaces, Phadke et al. (2011) summarize this dichotomy in their call for women's right to loiter by acknowledging that the act of women occupying public space without purpose challenges the assumption that women must justify their presence.

Therefore, although having their roots in extensive histories of segregation, modern WOPS are hybrid responses influenced by local cultural and political dynamics, global feminist movements, colonial and postcolonial legacies, and historical traditions. This development emphasizes the importance of contextually-nuanced and culturally-sensitive analyses: WOPS should be understood as complex responses that fit within larger, overarching patterns of power, modernity, and development, rather than as merely regressive or liberating.

Theoretical Concepts

Spatiality and Gender

Studies of urban theory, geography, and design emphasize that space is rarely ever neutral or unbiased, but rather a means through which power and existence are contested. In terms of gender relations, feminist geography and urban studies explain how the design of things like projects, infrastructure, and spaces can significantly influence women's mobility, access, and ease of navigating life. Urban spaces have historically been gendered, primarily due to the marginalization of women in urban planning and decision-making processes. This exclusion has manifested in city landscapes that often overlook women's specific needs, further perpetuating gender disparities. In "Invisible Women," Caroline Criado-Perez explains how the lack of gender-sensitive data greatly impacts urban design and exacerbates inequalities (Criado-Perez,

2019), concluding that the modern world was designed by men for men, leaving women at an inherent disadvantage, requiring more equity-based interventions to improve their standing.

Lefebvre, in his book *The Production of Space*, argued that spatial arrangements are socially produced. “In 1939 he (Lefebvre) announced that the dialectic was spatial as well as temporal... that is, space was both a material product of social relations (the concrete) and a manifestation of relations, a relation itself (the abstract). It was as much a part of social relations as was time” (Gottdiener, 1993, p.130). In doing so, he linked physical environments to political, economic, and cultural factors. Applying this insight to WOPS shows that their meanings cannot simply be reduced to exclusionary spaces or merely walls, parks, or mobile compartments. Instead, they acquire or are prescribed symbolic associations of safety, solidarity, and freedom for and by women who use them. Women attach layered interpretations and meanings to these spaces: safe spaces from harassment or the male gaze, opportunities for socialization, and sometimes paradoxical reminders of the inequalities that make such segregation necessary. Feminist scholars like Rose (1993) point out that patriarchal power is upheld by dividing spaces along gender lines, most clearly seen in the difference between public and private spheres that keeps women at home and men out in the world. Hayden (1980) also notes that city planning has long reinforced these gender roles by confining women to domestic spaces, away from important social and economic centers. Together, these perspectives reveal that gendered spaces have been essentialized in both everyday life and the way our cities are designed, not just occasional or isolated phenomena.

This can also be understood through how Massey (1994) extends this argument by highlighting how space is always relational, dynamic, and imbued with gendered meanings: “What gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is

constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations” (p.66). This “constellation of social relations” has been explored further by Fatima Mernissi as the sexual politics of space and practices within and around the male-female dynamics in Muslim societies. Mernissi (1987) explains how space has historically functioned as a tool of gendered control in Muslim societies, stating “the frontier between the male and female worlds is one of the fundamental concepts of Muslim society,” where segregation becomes both exclusionary and regulatory. The spatial division of the sexes, she argues, “is not merely architectural but symbolic, signifying the sexual order and the distribution of power in society.” By controlling women’s movements and limiting their presence in public spaces, patriarchal systems maintained dominance through the regulation of mobility and sexuality. This ended up resulting in the exclusion of women from essential decision-making spaces, where, if they had been included and considered, modernization and development would have been more equitable. These practices of spatial segregation, however, also laid the groundwork for the emergence of WOPS as countermeasures.

Intersectional perspectives deepen this analysis by showing how spatial restrictions are not experienced uniformly but are mediated by class, race, religion, and cultural context. Valentine (2007) notes that the embodied experience of moving through space cannot be understood apart from the intersections of various factors, such as gender, race, disability, and class, that shape access and mobility. Acknowledging this intersectionality within a cultural context where the normalization of women’s separation from public space is commonplace, WOPS often emerge as critical interventions, responding to overlapping vulnerabilities that shape women’s ability to access and exist in urban environments safely and freely.

Empowerment and Agency

The concept of "empowerment" has evolved significantly across disciplines and practices, shaped by varied interpretations of power, agency, and socio-political contexts. Initially rooted in grassroots social movements, the term now spans development discourse, feminist theories, and global policy frameworks, encompassing diverse parameters and contested meanings. Empowerment and power, as theoretical constructions, have been pivotal to the discourse in gender and development studies, evolving significantly over the years in both definition and praxis. Literature offers a diverse and wide variety of perspectives regarding the essence of power and empowerment, reflecting their interdependent nature within the field of social sciences and academia.

In terms of historical context, the idea of empowerment emerged from Paulo Freire's (1973) pedagogy, which emphasized education as a tool for individual and collective transformation; his notion of conscientization (critical awareness) provided a foundation for seeing empowerment as both a process and an outcome (Parpart et al., 2002). While not coining the term directly, his work inspired intellectuals and activists to explore and expand on the concept of empowerment as a local, grassroots initiative to tackle poverty issues and marginalization. The term, then, developed a long history in social change work, emerging in fields such as "popular education, community psychology and community organizing, with pathways back to the 1970s and a presence in many countries from Brazil, to India, Kenya, Zimbabwe, the USA and the UK." With its popularity, its usage in other fields like the business sector saw empowerment manifest as a means for improving productivity within market structures. Subsequently, in more dominant discourse, the language of empowerment and participation was popularly adopted by feminists, mainstream development agencies, and

nongovernment organizations to cater to their specific developmental priorities, consciousness-raising, and collective action. This widespread dissemination and manipulation of the term empowerment, while objectively encouraging in terms of its popularization and accessibility, raises wider concerns about its inherent transformative potential (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Parpart et al., 2002).

This widespread applicability, thus, could reasonably be explained by the diversity in definitions of power, and its applicability within practice. Empowerment simply implies the ability to exert power over things, individuals, circumstances, etc., in order to make something happen. However, more nuanced definitions and notions of power have emerged in popular discourse since the 1970s. Batliwala (1994) described power as “control over material assets, intellectual resources, and ideology.” Steve Lukes, on the other hand, focuses on a more discursive manifestation of power, arguing that power is wielded through controlling the agendas and thinking of others, rather than simply exerting control over resources. Power, as analyzed further by Foucault, is not simply about possession but is more about the dynamics within relationships, integrated into the fabric of daily human interactions, both on the individual and institutional level, and categorized by its fluidity and relational capacities. It is also tied to controlling discourses and knowledge, making it both repressive and a source of resistance (Parpart et al., 2002). This view aligns with the broader understanding in development studies, where power is often seen as relational and pervasive, influencing social structures and individual agency (Braun, 2020a).

Similarly, Friedmann’s (1992) categorization of power into three dimensions further attempts to elaborate on how it manifests. Social power is defined as access to information, skills, and participation in social organizations, enabling individuals to engage actively in their

communities. Political power refers to access to decision-making processes, whether individually or through collective action. Psychological power focuses on self-confidence and a sense of agency, often derived from successful action within one's social or political context. This nuanced framework not only emphasizes the multidimensionality of power but also demonstrates its application in fostering both individual and collective empowerment.

Combining these multiple definitions, Parpart et al., (2002) introduces a holistic structured definition, delineating power into four dimensions: power over, i.e., the exercise of exerting power and control over people and resources; power with, i.e., the importance of and ability to negotiate collective action; power to, i.e., the ability to exercise agency and perform; and power within, i.e., recognizing and developing individual consciousness and understanding. This breakdown has been highly influential in unpacking the layers at which power operates in varying societal contexts, particularly in relation to gender dynamics (Braun, 2005).

Diverse interpretations of power highlight its essential function in influencing social interactions and personal agency. By viewing power as dynamic, relational, and multifaceted, researchers establish a basis for comprehending its role not merely as a means of control but also as a source of resistance and change (Braun, 2021; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). This theoretical framework connects the discussion of power to real-world applications, paving the way for examining empowerment as a process that utilizes these intricate insights to confront and reformulate established structures and systems of oppression.

These interpretations of power have understandably resulted in a diverse implementation and structuring of empowerment and development. Developing on her definition of power, Batliwala considers empowerment as a process that challenges existing power dynamics to gain

control over sources of power, which necessitates a radical assault on cultural, national, and community power structures and systems of oppression, encapsulating both social and political transformation. Naila Kabeer (1994, as cited in Parpart et al., 2002) rejects the simplistic notions of power over resources and instead frames empowerment as the expansion of individuals' ability to make strategic life choices, particularly for those previously denied such agency. She emphasizes that empowerment requires access to resources, the ability to exercise agency, and the capacity to achieve desired outcomes. This transformative process demands attention to structural inequalities, such as gender biases embedded in cultural and institutional systems. Caroline Moser (1993, as cited in Parpart et al., 2002), also adopting an individualistic approach to empowerment, describes it as the ability to gain control over crucial material and non-material resources so as to influence life choices and enact change.

Kabeer, however, displays concern over the fragility of individual efforts, emphasizing endeavors of collective empowerment (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Kabeer, 1999). Gita Sen and Caren Grown (1988: 87, as cited in Parpart et al., 2002) took on a collectivist vision of empowerment, positing that “political mobilization, legal changes, consciousness-raising, and popular education” has the transformative potential to address problems and contexts facing women, achieved through mobilization at the socio-political level.

Rowlands (1997) describes empowerment as not merely external but also internal, involving shifts in self-perception, confidence, and the ability to collaborate with others for collective action. These perspectives emphasize that empowerment is deeply relational, requiring dismantling the systemic and discursive barriers perpetuating inequality while fostering individual and collective agency (D. Lewis & Kanji, 2009).

The true essence of empowerment lies in having the power to manipulate power itself, specifically, the macro-level power relations and structures that marginalize or enhance the micro-level manifestations of power (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). Without true bottom-up participatory development that includes marginalized groups in the process of development and, hence, shaping discourses, institutions, and material manifestations, any individual or isolated act of empowerment would thus, in fact, be superficial and constrained structurally, unless supported through a broader political, social, cultural, economic, and legal framework that permits challenging and subverting power relations. Yet, scholars explain that even interventions or forms of empowerment that may seem limited or superficial, like women experiencing safety and visibility in segregated spaces, can also serve as important psychological and cognitive shifts, by influencing their ‘power within’ or expanding their capabilities, to imagine new possibilities for themselves (Kabeer, 1999; Rowlands, 1997; Sen, 1999). When put into the context of gender empowerment, specifically women’s empowerment, there needs to be a greater understanding of the interconnectedness of global, national and local forces (Braun 2011, 2020b), and a more nuanced analysis of the context-specific power dynamics of various societies that display differing levels and types of freedoms, robustness of institutions and discursive practices that impact “both individual conscientization (power within) as well as the ability to work collectively, which can lead to politicized power with others, which provides the power to bring about change” (Parpart et al., 2002, p.4).

This diversification of definitions of power and empowerment has resulted in the expansion of intervention strategies, from simply improving access to resources to more sustainable measures like grassroots conscientization and mobilization. As Kabeer describes how, “strategies of 'empowerment from within'... entail reflection, analysis and assessment of

what has hitherto been taken for granted so as to uncover the socially constructed and socially shared basis of apparently individual problems. New forms of consciousness arise out of women's newly acquired access to the intangible resources of analytical skills, social networks, organizational strength, solidarity, and sense of not being alone.” (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015, p. 405)

An empowering methodology engenders results that facilitate empowerment. Hence, it can be deduced that empowerment is both a process and an outcome. This resonates with Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach to development, describing empowerment as both a means and an end (Sen, 1999). While criticized for his lack of attention to the political processes involved in facilitating empowerment, he emphasizes the need for an expansion of individual capacities and capabilities, which would, in turn, lead to empowerment to fight for a better life. This empowerment is best carried out at the local level.

The lived experience of empowerment is not universal. As Wieringa (1994) observes, empowerment often requires women to “decode and reinscribe” their own self-concepts, a process that can be deeply painful, but still provides the security of tradition and of the consent of one’s social surroundings. Similarly, Parpart et al. (2002) warn that participation can impose disproportionate burdens on women from marginalized groups, whose time and resources are already strained and are often facing double or triple burdens as a result of “development.” This highlights the importance of attending to intersectional differences in empowerment processes (Crenshaw, 1991; Valentine, 2007).

The notion of agency further complicates these debates. Mona Eltahawy, through her lived experiences of working in Egypt during various gender revolutions, frames agency as acts

of resistance, arguing that women can reclaim their power by directly challenging the status quo, whether through unveiling, protest, or what she calls “f-word: feminism”- an unapologetic confrontation with patriarchy. Her interpretation, true to her experiences, identifies agency in visible resistance, which she categorizes as a transformative process (Channel 4 News, 2015; Eltahawy, 2015). Yet, this definition is met with contention, where various other scholars and theorists provide alternative perspectives on what agency could look like. Kabeer (1999) talks about the idea of “quotidian agency” as the everyday strategies through which women negotiate constraints, from subtle acts of noncompliance and nonconformity to conducting reconfigurations of their environments. Desai (2002) also calls these “subtle strategies” that allow women to improve and enhance their lives within the constraints of patriarchal households without causing noticeable or wide-scale dissent. These ideas can show how even informal and everyday actions have transformative potential and can be as significant, albeit within different time frames, as radical mobilization.

Taking it a step further, Mahmood’s (2005) work diversifies the idea of agency even further by showing, through her work with women during Egypt’s Mosque movement, how agency can be exercised, rather than through submission, devotion, and alignment with religious traditions, contrary to what is routinely presented in Western scholarship. Supported in this notion is Butler (1999), who theorized that agency is realized through the repetition and resignification of norms, where “possibilities for subversion are embedded within the very structures of power that constrain them.”

Feminist anthropology also expands similar ideas by showing how empowerment can be relational, affective, and intergenerational. Yarris (2017), for example, demonstrates how Nicaraguan grandmothers caring for grandchildren left behind by migrant daughters interpret

their caregiving not simply as burden but as a moral practice and form of agency that sustains transnational family life despite structural inequalities. Instead of viewing empowerment solely as explicit resistance or formal participation, this emphasizes that care, duty, and solidarity are forms of agency within restricted circumstances. This relates with conservative urban contexts like Peshawar, where women's accounts of safety, dignity, and social responsibility within WOPS similarly reveal empowerment as an embodied, relational practice grounded in care and diligence, alongside more visible forms of public participation (Yarris, 2017).

Collectively, these perspectives highlight how the ideas of empowerment and agency are diverse, impacted by various intersectionalities and embodied experiences. For WOPS, this means they can be viewed not only as spaces of resistance but also as sites where agency is expressed in quieter or quotidian experiences, each lived experience deeply contextual and socially constructed.

Patriarchy, Bargains, and Symbolic Control

The concept of patriarchy serves as the basis for understanding the systematic oppression of women in feminist theory. Broadly defined, patriarchy refers to a system in which men hold the majority of the power, and women are excluded from it. However, the width and complexity of patriarchy means that no single definition can fully capture its multifaceted nature. This requires the recognition of patriarchy as a diverse and complex system of oppression that permeates various dimensions of social life.

Prominent definitions look at patriarchy in connection to various facets, a few notable ones being: a political-social system of dominance maintained through psychological terrorism (Hooks, 2004), violence, or sexual subjugation (Dworkin, 1987); a system of social structures

and practices that oppress, exploit and dominate women (Walby, 1991); a gendering of social reproduction and labor to sustain male dominance and economic inequities (Fraser, 2013); and, an overarching system that organizes gender relations and perpetuates male dominance and control over women (Connell, 1987). As noted, each definition targets a particular niche, attesting to the widespread implication of patriarchy within existing structures. The single common thread among all definitions provided by these prominent writers, sociologists, researchers, and others is that it is the system of relationships, beliefs, and values ingrained in various formal and informal spheres of life, i.e., societal, political, and economic. In her book “Feminist Anthropology,” Ortner (2022) defines patriarchy in perhaps the broadest definitions, as “a social formation of male-gendered power with a particular structure that can be found with striking regularity in many different arenas of social life, from small-scale contexts like the family, kin groups, and gangs, up through larger institutional contexts like the police, the military, organized religion, sports, the state, and more.”

A major step taken towards understanding wider systems of oppression was made by Kimberle Crenshaw, who discussed how patriarchy, among other forms of oppression like racism and classism, intersects to create complex “systems of dominations” (Crenshaw, 1991). While patriarchy is a system of oppression in itself, it manifests and embeds itself within various societal groups and populations differently, and often intersectionally to create more complex, overlapping issues. Crenshaw’s work is essential for research in the social sciences, as it provides a useful framework for understanding how various intersecting forms of restrictions, such as cultural interpretations of religious teachings, socio-economic factors, and gendered dimensions, including age and class, influence women's experiences in public spaces. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how women navigate these multiple,

overlapping social identities and systems of power, particularly in conservative environments. Religious and conservative environments, in themselves, create another intersectional challenge of understanding the suppression of women, not through religion itself but through the continuous invention and transformation of Islamic conventions and their renegotiation under changing historical circumstances (Bernal, 1994).

When it comes to Islam, its manifestations in the public sphere vary not just from one country to another, but even within the same country, e.g., Pakistan. Although it is officially known as the "Islamic Republic of Pakistan," public spaces in major cities like Peshawar, Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi appear and feel quite different. These differences primarily stem from each place's unique blend of cultural traditions, social norms, and economic conditions.

With Foucault's (1997) concept of power being relational and dispersed which is not held but exercised through discourses, institutions and practices that regulate behavior, and Bourdieu's (2001) expansion of this idea of power and gender domination into symbolic violence which is naturalized through everyday practices and cultural codes, patriarchal power then becomes not only coercive but also subtle, inscribed and imbedded into norms, habits, and institutions that shape women's subjectivities. Women in patriarchal societies navigate the structures in various ways. Kandiyoti (1988) describes this process as "bargaining with patriarchy," explaining that women do not simply submit to these norms; rather, they negotiate with them in various capacities to maximize their security, autonomy, and mobility. These bargains are context-specific, dynamic, and unique, but while they allow women to exercise constrained forms of choice, they also have the potential to reinforce the very structures that restrain them. Desai (2002) also explores this relationship or resistance and navigation with that she describes as "subtle strategies," observing how women often undertake subtle strategies to

bring change and enhance their lives within the context of the household and its restrictions, embracing a form of agency often overlooked and undervalued yet these informal form of politics hold profound value and potential for incremental change. She further elaborates, “Subtle strategies can be a form of informal politics, which represent women’s citizenship in action, and are important for the empowerment of communities and individuals.” In conservative societies, subtle and informal strategies might actually make more of a difference than open confrontation, acting as small but meaningful steps towards bigger changes over time (Wieringa, 1994).

Looking at participation becomes important because it provides a lens through which power, patriarchy, and agency interact within development practice. When participation is genuine, it gives people, especially those who are often marginalized, like women, the opportunity to actively shape decisions that impact their lives, rather than remaining on the sidelines. This kind of involvement is key to creating societies that are both sustainable and more equitable, since projects that are guided by local knowledge and lived realities are more likely to align with community needs and local priorities (Lewis & Kanji, 2009). Truly meaningful participation also works to reduce existing inequalities by giving more people a voice and a role in decision-making, making empowerment a lived reality rather than just an abstract idea.

When we look at the discussion around participation, it becomes clear how closely it ties into both patriarchy and the ways social control is maintained. In development circles, empowerment is often confused with simply letting people participate. But not all participation is meaningful; there are big differences in how much people are actually involved. Arnstein’s (1969) “ladder of participation” shows how tokenistic forms of involvement can mask the absence of real decision-making power. Lewis & Kanji (2009) point out that, while participatory development was originally supposed to empower people and move away from seeing them as

just passive recipients of help, the true transformative power of participation has gotten lost: “The focus shifted to an array of participatory methods and tools, rather than ideas about transformative changes in power relationships”. In societies shaped by patriarchal norms, women's participation is frequently limited by deep-rooted structural inequalities. Desai (2002) observes that men often maintain significant authority over the choices and activities of women in their families, fearing that women's public involvement might threaten male authority. These patterns are further reinforced when NGOs and policymakers engage with women primarily as mothers or caregivers (Kabeer, 1994). Even when women do play active roles in community development, their contributions are too often overlooked or go unrecognized, leaving much of their important work undervalued or invisible.

Even with these barriers in place, participation can still create spaces where people, especially women, exercise real agency. White (1995) highlights that there is a big difference between nominal participation and genuine, transformative engagement, where individuals define agendas and act on their own terms. In a similar vein, Sen and Grown (1987) argue that development efforts will fall short without truly inclusive and equitable participation from women. They also stress that for such a change to matter, it must directly confront the deeper economic and cultural inequalities at play. Hickey and Mohan (2005) add that only by looking at how participation interacts with underlying power dynamics and political systems can we move toward more meaningful, transformative development (Lewis & Kanji, 2009)

Global Perspectives, Typologies and Case Studies

All over the world, WOPS have taken on many forms, emerging in response to the specific needs for safety, freedom of movement, and increased involvement in public life.

Whether it is parks, special train cars, buses, or community centers, these spaces show the different ways that governments, community groups, and women themselves have tried out segregation as a way to both protect and empower women. By looking at how these spaces work in various societies, we gain a better understanding of their role in countries like Pakistan and get important insights into what they mean for gender equality and urban development.

Women-only parks are a notable example of gender-specific spaces. In Iran, these parks have been created both in response to government policies and women's calls for safe recreational areas. According to Shahrokni (2014), such parks offer women a paradoxical sense of freedom: they provide a place where women can exercise, relax, and even take off their mandatory headscarves for a while, but at the same time, they maintain the state's control by making freedom possible only within these segregated areas. Shirvani(2017) calls these places "public spaces of freedom," highlighting how they give women a chance to participate in public life, while also reinforcing traditional gender boundaries. These parks reflect the ongoing negotiations between the government's focus on modesty and women's requests for safe environments. A similar example is Purdah Bagh in Old Delhi, which shows how women-only parks can help women be more visible and mobile in areas where public recreation is mostly for men. All of these cases reveal a certain tension within women-only parks: they offer a kind of liberation, but always within the limits set by cultural, religious, and political expectations.

Transport segregation represents another key typology. In Japan, women-only train carriages have been introduced in response to widespread sexual harassment in public transport. In India, the long-running "Ladies Special" trains offer a parallel service, serving as critical spaces for women commuters to travel safely in densely populated cities (Arundhathi, 2024). These trains reveal how segregation can simultaneously improve women's access to education

and employment while reinforcing assumptions about vulnerability and protection. Beyond Asia, Latin American cities have also experimented with women-only transport. Mexico City's "Metro Mujeres" initiative provides segregated carriages and buses for women in one of the world's busiest urban transport networks. Dunkel-Graglia (2013) finds that while these initiatives improve women's daily commuting experiences, they also reinforce narratives of women as perpetual victims in need of protection, raising questions about sustainability and long-term impact. At the same time, they illustrate the creativity of urban governance in addressing harassment and insecurity in high-density urban environments, highlighting the trade-offs between short-term safety and long-term inclusion.

Contested Debates on Gender Segregation

Segregation vs Integration

The debate of whether gender segregation provides benefits or perpetuates existing exclusions continues within mainstream feminist discourses about WOPS. Advocates and proponents of WOPS frame these interventions as pragmatic strategies to safeguard women's mobility and wellbeing in environments where harassment or exclusionary social norms are prevalent. For example, women-only parks in Iran and Pakistan (Shahrokni, 2014; Shirvani, 2017) or women-only transportation services/compartments in Pakistan, India, Egypt, Mexico, and Japan (Arundhathi, 2024; Asian Development Bank, 2017; Horii & Burgess, 2012; Nadeem et al., 2023; Tillous, 2020), or women-only educational institutions (Mernissi, 1987; Mir-Hosseini, 2006; van Geel, 2016) are examples of context-specific interventions to risks and vulnerabilities present in society, and enable a level of engagement that would otherwise be difficult to do so in those contexts. Such spaces have the capacity to enhance confidence and

visibility, allowing women to “loiter” and normalize their presence in public spaces (Phadke et al., 2011). They provide, at the very minimum, short-term benefits and expand immediate capabilities that can lead to longer-term freedoms (Drèze & Sen, 1989).

Nevertheless, opponents argue that gender segregation may in fact perpetuate the very power structures it aims to dismantle or oppose. Instead of directly confronting patriarchal norms within public spaces, the creation of segregated areas for women can inadvertently re-legitimize exclusion. Protective discourses surrounding segregation can unintentionally reinforce essentialist ideas of women's vulnerability (Mohanty, 1984), or interventions framed as "saving women" often “depoliticize their agency and reinforce stereotypes” (Abu-Lughod, 2002), especially if they are framed from a Western developmentalist or modernist lens. Other critics also expand on these ideas; Mernissi (1975), for example, elaborates how spatial segregation has been used as a key intervention of sexual politics that polices women’s mobility, with WOPS running the risk of “reinscribing the symbolic order that makes separation seem natural.” Butler’s (1997) theory of performativity also warns that separating spaces by gender can reinforce traditional expectations about where and how women should be present; true change only happens when these norms are challenged and redefined within shared public environments, rather than by withdrawing from them. Similarly, Eltahawy (2015) supports the idea of “integration through confrontation”, which is in line with her idea of agency exercised through resistance of patriarchal control, rather than adjusting or conforming to it; for her, segregation may offer relief, but it still prolongs or postpones the necessary action needed for the reconstruction of public space. For instance, while women-only compartments in transportation might provide immediate relief from harassment, they do not address the underlying gender inequalities and cultural attitudes that render shared public spaces unsafe.

This debate thus reflects a broader tension between immediate protection and long-term transformation. Integrationist perspectives argue that women's right to the city cannot be realized through segregation but through reshaping urban environments, social norms, and institutions to accommodate gender equity. UN-Habitat (2012) stresses that inclusive urban planning is essential for sustainable gender equality, while Cornwall and Rivas (2015) highlight the need for empowerment strategies that move beyond symbolic measures toward structural change. From a design and policy perspective, Criado-Perez (2019) argues that designing streets, transit, and services based on male-centered data results in environments that are unsuitable and unsafe for women. Rather than advocating for gender-segregated spaces, she suggests the solution is to create inclusive and evidence-based designs for shared spaces, e.g., improved lighting, better routes, more frequent services, responsive reporting systems, and diverse staffing. By addressing the underlying biases in how spaces are designed, planned, and managed, we can eliminate the need for segregation and make public spaces safer and more accessible for everyone. This solution points towards the necessity of women's participation in decision-making spaces, another problem that exists in conservative contexts, making inclusive design more difficult to realize. Hence, context can complicate straight binaries. Women may programmatically endorse women-only options that deliver relief from existing issues of safety, restrictions, resources, etc., as these bargains can expand room for mobility and better access (Kandiyoti, 1988). Analyzing this debate through Sen's (1999) framework, segregation can be seen as a means that expands a subset of capabilities in the short term, but sustained and holistic freedoms require systemic change in larger, mixed, public spaces for more inclusive and equitable development that is culturally sensitive and sustainable (Criado-Perez, 2019; UN-Habitat, 2012).

Intersectionality and Inclusivity

Discussions surrounding segregation are inseparable from issues of inclusiveness and intersectionality. Crenshaw's (1991) work on intersectionality demonstrates how women's experiences with oppression are both patterned and variable, influenced by the interconnected factors of race, class, gender, age, and other identities. In the context of WOPS, this framework enables us to understand how women-segregated spaces may be framed as empowering, but they can also overlook differences among women themselves. A park or train compartment created for "all women" might still be more accessible to urban, middle-class women than those from rural, working-class, or minority backgrounds. Working with the idea of inclusion, Mohanty (1984) criticizes global feminist ideas that generalize "third-world women as a single monolithic entity", cautioning that the generalized assumption of shared or similar vulnerabilities may disregard the diverse voices and strategies of women in these societies, especially, in this case, conservative contexts.

Further intersectional differences can be observed in the diversity of embodied realities that women experience within Islamic societies. Mernissi (1987) emphasizes that spatial segregations are not uniformly experienced; rather, they can differ based on status or economic class; affluent women may maneuver through limitations with more liberty, whereas lower-income women face stricter confinement due to a lack of resources. A similar critique was also raised by Criado-Perez (2019), who highlighted how certain design choices can foster a data bias that erases women's diversity and privileges a normative female subject that is typically urban, able-bodied, and middle-class. These biases, when trickled down into policy decisions, can result in non-inclusive results that perpetuate more exclusion, reinforce existing hierarchies, and further tokenistic developmental interventions (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

Empirical research from various global settings consistently shows that the inclusiveness of WOPS is heavily influenced by intersectional factors. For example, Reza Arjmand's (2017) study of women's urban parks in Tehran finds that women from lower-income backgrounds often face barriers to accessing gender-segregated parks due to financial or mobility challenges. Research from Mumbai shows that although women-only transport services are essential for enhancing women's safety and mobility, they frequently fall short in meeting the needs of disabled women or those from economically disadvantaged groups (Arundhati, 2024).

Keeping these theoretical discussions on the production of gendered spaces, empowerment, agency, and the nature of WOPS in mind, these debates require a more context-specific means and mode of inquiry that is sensitive to the intersections of patriarchy, development, and cultural norms, while also avoiding Western, generalized frameworks of analysis. The following chapter, therefore, outlines the methodological framework and research design employed to investigate these ideas.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

This research aimed to study the dynamics of women-only public spaces (WOPS) in conservative urban contexts, focusing specifically on women's views of these spaces in Peshawar, Pakistan. With the topic being largely under-researched, this necessitated the adoption of a framework that encouraged the collection of emergent theories and concepts without relying on the existing mainstream frameworks that are largely Western-centric and may be limited in their applicability to the specific contexts of these societies. Hence, the data collection process was framed through the Grounded Theory methodology. This research employed a mixed-method approach for data collection, focusing on both quantitative and qualitative data, including both individual and group interviews, and leveraging the benefits of each method.

Grounded Theory

To comprehensively explore the complex dynamics of this under-researched topic, the study employed grounded theory methodology, which is effective at generating theory from data, particularly in the social sciences. This approach is crucial for understanding nuanced social phenomena within specific cultural contexts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and in doing so, it facilitated me in conducting an in-depth exploration of various interconnected social interactions and cultural implications, such as patriarchy, religion, and culture, among others. By adopting a women-centric and decolonial perspective, the research aimed to avoid imposing Western paradigms on conservative Muslim contexts in South Asia, addressing the very issues it critiques.

Different social environments present in themselves a different set of traditions and values, hence the rationale behind adopting this methodology was to allow for the continued exploration and elaboration of sensitive topics within the cultural context by maintaining an organic flow of conversation and building trust through participant interactions and personal observations, especially in contexts where norms and behaviors may be subtly negotiated, gatekept, or culturally regulated. The research was informed not only by existing literature and my own personal experiences of living in Peshawar, Pakistan, but also by its inductive nature, where theories emerge from the data itself rather than being imposed through preconceptions or hypotheses (Charmaz, 2014). This enabled a broader and deeper engagement with the subject matter, uncovering the subtle dynamics and implications of WOPS that a predefined hypothesis or my own potential personal bias might overlook or constrain.

The adaptable yet systematic approach of grounded theory influenced the selection and development of tailored, fluid, and open data collection tools for this study, like semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and questionnaires with space for open, unstructured responses. This integrative approach was beneficial, as, at times, verbal communication with a select few individuals did not fully encapsulate or convey the complexities of the underlying reality (Chun Tie et al., 2019); supplementing it with observations, nonverbal communication, and interactions enabled a more holistic understanding of behaviors, attitudes, and social norms within the spaces studied. Regular data-driven evolution of the research instruments, guided by predetermined interview themes, ensured a smooth and interactive inquiry process that enhanced the relevance and representativeness of the collected data.

A crucial factor determining the use of grounded theory within this research was its ability to generate actionable insights and facilitate the creation of exploratory and explanatory

theoretical frameworks that could be aligned with larger gender development goals and specific urban planning paradigms. To make use of grounded theory's inherent iterative process of data collection and analysis, the process was structured in a manner that allowed for the most efficient and insightful data gathering while ensuring continuous analysis. The research instruments were developed by considering the research questions and leveraging my positionality and understanding of the geographic and social contexts of the sites. This was facilitated by my theoretical and conceptual understanding of the subject matter, which stemmed from scholarly literature and my knowledge of research methodologies.

The data collection process began with a Focus Group Discussion (described in more detail below), which served the dual purpose of piloting and refining the existing instruments to better suit the objectives of the research and be tailored to the sensitivities of the research population, along with collecting preliminary insights about the broader themes of the study. Subsequent semi-structured interviews were conducted as small group discussions in parks, and simultaneous participant observations within those spaces helped contextualize and deepen the qualitative data, revealing important trends and insights. This was followed by a second focus group that discussed the preliminary findings, gathered further input, and explored more profound implications of the emerging patterns.

Concurrent with this qualitative data collection process, questionnaires on park and bus usage were disseminated online and in-person to collect complementary quantitative data, providing breadth to the data collected. At the conclusion of all the aforementioned data collection processes, expert interviews were conducted to enrich the understanding of the totality of the data, providing insights and actionable recommendations. The integration of data from this mixed-method approach allowed for the development of findings that were deeply rooted in the

participants' experiences and realities, laying a solid foundation for future policy and interventions in line with the global, national, and local agendas.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality. In conducting this research on WOPS in conservative urban contexts, my personal background and experiences have played a significant role in designing the study's methodological approach. As a woman born and raised in Pakistan and having lived in Peshawar, Pakistan, for twelve years, I possess a thorough understanding of the local socio-cultural, economic, and political landscapes, and how gendered ideologies and dynamics operate in and across these dimensions. This insider knowledge has also been decisive in framing the research questions, designing the data collection methods, and interpreting the findings. My positionality not only aided deeper access, trust, and more nuanced interactions with participants but also enabled a more culturally contextual perceptive and sensitive interpretation of the data. By explicitly acknowledging this influence, I aim to enhance the reflexivity and credibility of the research process. This approach aligns with the principles of constructivist grounded theory, which emphasizes “the co-construction of knowledge between the researcher and participants” and recognizes the impact of the researcher’s own background on the theoretical insights generated (Charmaz, 2014).

Justification

A mixed-methods approach is an effective strategy in social sciences research in general, and this specific research in particular. Research within the social sciences requires an understanding of complex human behaviors, evolving social norms, and the underlying power dynamics that influence different relationships (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Understanding how empowerment, agency, and other relevant complex phenomena manifest in a historically

deprived populace within a context highly influenced by a multiplicity of overarching social identities and locations like religion, culture, family, etc., requires a methodologically rigorous approach capable of delivering data that is informed by the depth of qualitative insights and the breadth of quantitative data.

Complementarity of Data. The quantitative method chosen, i.e., questionnaires, enabled the collection of holistic numerical data that provided a macroscopic view of usage patterns, frequency, and general attitudes towards WOPS, such as parks and buses, in the context of this research. This data was essential for identifying predominant trends and preparing a statistical analysis that was representative, to some extent, of the population being studied. The park usage questionnaire also provided space for an open-ended response, allowing respondents to expand or elaborate on any details they saw fit. Alternatively, the qualitative data gathered through the semi-structured interviews and observations offered a more comprehensive examination of the on-ground reality of these spaces through contextually relevant explorations that highlight the motivations, feelings, and cultural nuances behind these trends, centering on women's perspectives.

Enhanced Validity. Employing both qualitative and quantitative methods allowed for methodological triangulation, strengthening the validity of the research findings. This triangulation helped confirm the findings across different methodologies, increasing the reliability of the conclusions drawn from the data collected (Mertens, 2024).

Profundity of Perspective. The qualitative component in a mixed-method study enriches the quantitative findings by providing deeper insights into participant behaviors and attitudes; on the other hand, quantitative data offers validation or a capacity for generalizability of qualitative

perspectives recorded. This methodological combination facilitated the documentation of the interplay and dynamics inherent in women's perceptions of and interactions with WOPS. It provides a multifaceted understanding that a purely quantitative or qualitative methodology would have been unable to deliver (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Flexibility and Adaptability. In alignment with the fundamental nature of grounded theory, the mixed-method approach was particularly appropriate for this research. The study not only concentrates on a geographic area and population that is largely under-researched, but it also investigates phenomena capable of delivering diverse and dynamic findings, i.e., outcomes that cannot be predicted or hypothesized as to avoid diminishing or limiting the quality and scope of emergent theoretical contributions. This flexibility and adaptability are vital for exploratory research in general, but especially when examining themes where participant output, openness, and the contextual interpretation of behaviors can differ widely.

Addressing Research Questions?

The research methods, sites, and populations were selected for their ability to answer the research questions framing this inquiry. The table below shows the research questions corresponding to relevant methods:

Table 1: Research Questions Corresponding to Relevant Methods

Research Question	Focus Group Discussions	Small Group Discussions	Expert Int.	Questionnaires
How do women-only public spaces in conservative urban settings contribute to women's well-being, empowerment, and agency, and what are the perceived	✓	✓	✓	✓

benefits and challenges of these spaces as described by their users?				
What motivates women to access and utilize women-only public spaces in conservative urban settings, and what meanings do they associate with these spaces?	✓	✓	✓	✓
In what ways do women-only spaces challenge or reinforce existing patriarchal norms and social structures?	✓	✓	✓	

Sites

Data collection for this research was conducted both physically and virtually across multiple locations in Peshawar, Pakistan, with the sites selected strategically to reflect a diversity of spaces and gendered access within Peshawar. The sites were chosen for their relevance to the study's focus, their accessibility, and their ability to provide reasonable insights into women's experiences of navigating public and semi-public spaces.

The small-group and individual semi-structured interviews were conducted at two prominent women-only parks in Peshawar: Khyber Park and Ladies Park, selected for their active use by a diverse population of women, reflecting variation in terms of accessibility, socioeconomic demographics, and spatial design. Initially, interviews were also planned at Pardah Bagh, a historic women-only park located in Peshawar city, but due to its closure and being replaced as a "family park," I replaced this site with Ladies Park.

For the quantitative surveys, data collection was carried out in both physical and digital formats. In-person surveys related to park usage were administered at both Khyber Park and Ladies Park. The bus usage surveys were conducted in transit, at various Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) terminals, and while riding buses across Peshawar. Both the bus and park usage surveys were also distributed online via Microsoft Forms, enabling broader reach through the researcher's personal and professional networks and allowing for the participation of women who may not frequent the parks or buses in person due to mobility, time, or privacy constraints.

Participant observation was conducted at two distinct locations: Khyber Park, a women-only park, and Shahi Bagh, a mixed-use park, facilitating a comparative reflection on the two contrasting gendered space compositions.

The focus group discussions were both conducted in Hayatabad, Peshawar, a location selected for its ease of access and convenience for the FGD participants. The first FGD was held before the interviews and survey distribution, while the second was conducted after the completion of most primary data collection.

Expert interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom, primarily to access participants more conveniently without being restricted by physical location or time limitations in Pakistan.

Data Collection

Focus Group Discussions

Justification of Method. Focus group discussions (FGDs) are a valuable qualitative research method to gather diverse perspectives on a topic within a group setting. This method is beneficial for exploring people's experiences, opinions, and emotions in a way that would not be

as accessible through other data collection methods, like one-on-one interviews or surveys. It also takes advantage of group interactions to facilitate richer, more detailed responses, where participants can react and build on each other's contributions (Krueger, 2009). In the context of studying WOPS in conservative urban settings, the FGDs served multiple strategic purposes, one of them being that they provided a platform where participants could collectively discuss and reflect on their experiences and perceptions, which was crucial for understanding shared and diverging views on topics like empowerment, safety, and social norms.

In this study, two FGDs were conducted with a total of 7 participants in each session. The first discussion aimed to pilot and refine the research questions for the upcoming surveys and semi-structured and expert interviews, ensuring that these instruments were culturally and contextually appropriate for the target population and complementary to my research questions; hence, improving the validity of the data collection process. The second session was conducted to engage participants in reflecting on the preliminary findings from these interviews, providing an opportunity to deepen the understanding of the data and to incorporate participant feedback into the final analysis. Changes in participant composition, where two individuals from the first session were unable to rejoin and were replaced, were managed to maintain the integrity and continuity of the discussions and were accounted for in the study's methodological framework.

Details and Statistics. Each FGD was conducted at the Lincoln Corner Peshawar, within the Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar, providing a neutral and accessible location for all participants. Discussions lasted approximately 90 minutes, ensuring sufficient depth and breadth of conversation. The size of each group was chosen to achieve a diversity of discussion while maintaining a manageable conversational flow, allowing all participants an opportunity to contribute meaningfully.

Table 2: List of Focus Group Discussion 1 Participants

#	Participant Code	Participant Occupation
1	FGD1-P1	Senior Outreach Officer at an International NGO
2	FGD1-P2	English Educator at a Private Institution
3	FGD1-P3	A graduate of BS Social Sciences
4	FGD1-P4	Freelance Writer
5	FGD1-P5	Current Student of Bachelor's in Business Administration
6	FGD1-P6	Graduate of BS Political Science + Entrepreneur
7	FGD1-P7	House Resident Officer - Dentistry

Table 3: List of Focus Group Discussion 2 Participants

#	Participant Code	Participant Occupation
1	FGD2-P1	Senior Outreach Officer at an International NGO
2	FGD2-P2	English Educator at a Private Institution
3	FGD2-P3	Graduate of BS Social Sciences
4	FGD2-P4	Freelance Writer
5	FGD2-P5	Current Student of Bachelor's in Business Administration
6	FGD2-P6	Educator at a Public Institution
7	FGD2-P7	Project Employee for an International NGO

Sample and Participant Justification. Participants for both FGDs were selected through purposive sampling, strategically designed to include women from the researcher's personal and professional networks in Peshawar who were knowledgeable about WOPS or had relevant professional engagements. The sample was composed of a diverse group including students, working professionals, and other residents of various ages, educational backgrounds, and ethnicities; this selection criterion facilitated the expression of a broad spectrum of views and experiences. Participants were women aged 18 and above, who were proficient in English,

Pashto, or Urdu, facilitating effective communication during the discussions. The study specifically excluded women who did not have personal or professional experiences related to WOPS, those under the age of 18, and individuals not fluent in the study's operational languages. This approach ensured that all participants could actively engage in and contribute to the discussions without language barriers or lack of contextual experience, which was crucial for gathering insightful and relevant data for the study.

Language. Discussions were conducted in a mix of English, Urdu, and Pashto. This multilingual approach ensured that all participants could express themselves in the language they felt most comfortable with, accommodating the linguistic diversity of the participant group and ensuring clear communication.

Informed Consent Process. Prior to the discussions, participants were provided a detailed consent form, which they read and signed. This form outlined the purpose of the research, audio recording, the nature of their participation, and how the data would be used. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, with participants given pseudonyms in all research outputs to protect their identity.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Justification of Method. Semi-structured interviews are a widely recognized qualitative research method, highly valued for their flexibility and depth in exploring complex social phenomena. This method combines a predetermined set of open-ended questions, informed by the researcher's knowledge, literature, and research objectives, with the opportunity for the interviewer to explore particular themes or responses further (Bryman, 2016). In the context of this research topic, semi-structured interviews facilitated an in-depth exploration of individual

perceptions, experiences, and the subtle nuances of social interactions that might not be as comprehensively disclosed in a more structured survey or in larger focus groups.

Furthermore, the adaptability of semi-structured interviews was crucial in the research's conservative geo-social environment, where participants generally prefer discussing sensitive topics in a less formal or manufactured setting. This method also accommodated the shift from individual to small group interviews, a modification driven by the observed social behavior of women in the parks and their preference for group interaction, mostly due to convenience and comfort. This adaptation not only aligned with the cultural context but also enriched the data collection process by capturing a broader range of interactions and communal experiences, which were central to understanding the collective dynamics of WOPS. The ability to conduct interviews in a semi-structured manner addressed the complexity of gender dynamics in public spaces, providing the flexibility needed to adapt to unforeseen circumstances and participant preferences, thus ensuring the relevance and depth of the gathered information.

Details and Statistics. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in two key locations within Peshawar: Khyber Park and Ladies Park. These sites were chosen due to their relevance to the study's focus on WOPS and their accessibility to the target demographic. Some interviews were planned to be conducted in Pardah Bagh, situated inside Shahi Bagh, but the site was excluded from the data collection due to its recent transformation into a family park.

A total of 9 semi-structured interviews were successfully completed, involving 18 participants. This adjustment, to accommodate group interviews in addition to the initially planned individual interviews, occurred as the research unfolded, revealing that women in these parks often visited in groups and preferred to engage in discussions collectively rather than

individually. This shift not only facilitated a more natural interaction among participants but also provided a richer context for understanding the communal aspects of WOPS. Each interview varied in duration, lasting between 10 and 25 minutes, depending on the depth of the conversation and the participants' engagement.

Table 4: Small Group Discussion Interview Details

#	No. of Participants	Location
SI 1	1	Khyber Park, Phase 1, Hayatabad, Peshawar
SI 2	3	Khyber Park, Phase 1, Hayatabad, Peshawar
SI 3	1	Khyber Park, Phase 1, Hayatabad, Peshawar
SI 4	3	Khyber Park, Phase 1, Hayatabad, Peshawar
SI 5	2	Khyber Park, Phase 1, Hayatabad, Peshawar
SI 6	3	Khyber Park, Phase 1, Hayatabad, Peshawar
SI 7	1	Ladies Park, Phase 6, Hayatabad, Peshawar
SI 8	3	Ladies Park, Phase 6, Hayatabad, Peshawar
SI 9	1	Ladies Park, Phase 6, Hayatabad, Peshawar
Total Participants		18

Sample and Participant Selection Justification. The participant selection for the semi-structured interviews was designed to ensure the inclusion of individuals directly engaged with or affected by WOPS in Peshawar. This purposive sampling approach targeted women who were present at the specific parks chosen for the study, ensuring that the participants could provide contextually relevant insights based on their personal experiences.

The inclusion criteria for participants in this study were carefully defined to ensure relevant and insightful contributions. Participants included women who were visitors of the parks who could provide firsthand experiences and perspectives on the utility, safety, and social

dynamics of these spaces. All participants were required to be aged 18 and above, guaranteeing that they were adults capable of providing informed consent and engaging in discussions about public spaces without parental supervision. Additionally, participants needed to be proficient in one or more of the languages used in the study, i.e., English, Urdu, or Pashto, to facilitate clear and effective communication during the interviews. This selection process was crucial in gathering a diverse range of viewpoints from women of different ages, backgrounds, and experiences, enriching the study's findings with a broad spectrum of insights into how WOPS impact their users.

Language. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in three languages: English, Urdu, and Pashto. This multilingual approach was employed to ensure that all participants could express themselves in the language they felt most comfortable with, allowing a more genuine and accurate exchange of perspectives. Conducting interviews in multiple languages also helped accommodate non-native speakers of Urdu or Pashto, who might otherwise feel excluded or unable to articulate their thoughts and feelings fully.

Informed Consent Process. Given the conservative context of the study's location and the sensitive nature of discussing public spaces and women's experiences therein, the informed consent process was carefully tailored to respect cultural norms and individual comfort levels. Instead of written consent forms, which might be viewed with suspicion or could deter participation due to literacy concerns or cultural perceptions about signing documents, oral consent was obtained from all participants. This method of securing consent is often used in settings where written consent could be a barrier to participation and is supported by ethical guidelines that prioritize the comfort and understanding of participants over the formality of written documentation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Before the start of each interview, the study's purpose, the nature of their participation, the use of the collected data, and the voluntary nature of their involvement were explained and communicated to the participants, and they were assured of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Expert Interviews

Justification of Method. Expert interviews are used extensively to collect data from individuals who have specialized and relevant knowledge about a particular issue, community, or phenomenon. Often unstructured by nature, these interviews are invaluable for gathering in-depth insights from a targeted group of experts or insiders who possess a deeper, often practical understanding of the subject matter under investigation (Marshall, 1996). In the context of this study on WOPS in conservative urban settings, expert interviews were adopted to gather deeper insights across various sectors that directly deal with or interact with these spaces. This method allows for the extraction of specialized knowledge from different perspectives within the community, including academia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on women's issues, and government bodies. Each informant brought a unique perspective, providing a multi-dimensional view of the dynamics at play.

The choice of virtual interviews was strategic, given the need to overcome geographical and scheduling constraints while ensuring the inclusion of diverse and pertinent viewpoints. Virtual platforms often facilitate easier scheduling and can make interviewees more comfortable, leading to more open and honest exchanges (Janghorban et al., 2014).

Details and Statistics. The key informant interviews were conducted virtually to accommodate the diverse locations and schedules of the informants. A total of two interviews

were conducted, each with an expert from a distinct professional background: an academic specializing in gender studies and development, and a representative from a non-governmental organization (NGO) working on women's rights.

Each interview was conducted using Zoom, a video conferencing tool that enabled flexible and interactive dialogue despite geographic distance. The interviews were semi-structured, providing a framework that guided the discussions while allowing for the exploration of emergent themes specific to each informant's area of expertise. This format was particularly effective in encouraging informants to share unique in-depth insights and professional experiences relevant to the study's focus.

The duration of the interviews ranged from 60 to 90 minutes, providing sufficient time to cover the extensive range of topics pertinent to the informants' professional insights and experiences.

Table 5: Expert Interview Participant Details

#	Participant	Participant Profession
1	E1	Manager at a Women's Rights NGO in Peshawar
2	E2	Head of the Department of Gender Studies at a university in Peshawar

Sample and Participant Selection Justification. The selection of experts was guided by a purposive sampling strategy aimed at gathering multifaceted perspectives on the subject matter. The informants were chosen based on their professional standing and ability to provide valuable insights into the usage and policy implications of these spaces, as well as their broader knowledge about the state of women's agency and empowerment in society.

Informed Consent. The informed consent process was tailored to meet ethical standards and suit the virtual format of the discussions. Participants received a detailed IRB-approved consent form via email before the interviews, outlining the study's objectives, data use, and confidentiality protocols. They were asked to carefully review this document and provide their verbal consent at the start of each virtual interview, which was audio-recorded to ensure documentation. This process guaranteed that informants were well-informed about their rights and the study's privacy measures, reinforcing trust and compliance with ethical guidelines. All personal identifiers were promised to be anonymized in the research outputs, securing the confidentiality of the participants' contributions.

Surveys/Questionnaires

Justification of Method. Questionnaires are a frequent tool in social science research for systematically collecting data from a broad audience. They allow for the efficient gathering of quantifiable information from a large number of individuals, making them indispensable for studies that require extensive data on public opinions and behaviors (Fink, 2003). In the context of this research, questionnaires were used to quantitatively assess the usage and perceptions of women-only parks and gender-segregated buses in Peshawar. This method enabled the collection of structured, comparable data that is essential for identifying trends and making generalizable conclusions about the population's preferences and experiences.

Details and Statistics: Two separate questionnaires were developed and administered: one focused on park usage and the other on bus usage. 187 respondents completed the parks usage questionnaire, while the bus usage questionnaire had 156 responses. Both questionnaires were administered in-person and online to ensure a wide reach and to accommodate participants'

preferences. Khyber Park and Ladies Park were selected as the in-person sites for conducting the park usage survey, while BRT bus terminals and buses served as the preferred locations for administering the bus usage questionnaires. Online distribution was done through the researcher's personal and professional networks, using Microsoft Forms to facilitate easy participation and secure data management.

Sample and Participant Selection Justification. Participants were selected using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling techniques to represent women's experiences in Peshawar broadly. The inclusion criteria for participants were being female, residing in or near Peshawar, and having experiences with similar public spaces and gendered services.

Language and Accessibility. The Microsoft Forms questionnaires were made available in English and Urdu, reflecting the linguistic diversity of the target demographic. The in-person versions were made understandable through English, Urdu, and Pashto. This multilingual approach ensured that no participant was excluded due to language barriers.

Informed Consent Process for Questionnaires. In the in-person settings at parks and bus terminals, the researcher verbally explained the consent details to each participant before administering the questionnaire. This approach was particularly important in contexts where participants might not have the time or inclination to read a detailed consent form, such as busy bus terminals or parks. By verbally summarizing the key points of the consent form, the researcher ensured that participants were fully informed and gave their consent to participate on the spot. For online distribution, the consent information was the first section of the Microsoft Forms questionnaire. Participants had to actively agree to the terms by selecting "Yes" before

they could proceed to answer the questionnaire. This method ensured that no data was collected without prior explicit consent, aligning with ethical research practices.

Participant Observation

Justification of Method. Participant observation stands out as a highly effective qualitative research method, particularly valuable for capturing non-verbal communications, behaviors, habits, and interactions within their natural settings. This method offers a unique vantage point to study social interactions and physical behaviors that are not readily disclosed through direct interviews or questionnaires, providing a comprehensive understanding of the environmental and social dynamics at play (Bernard, 2011).

For this research, participant observation offered crucial benefits. It provided firsthand insight into how the spaces were utilized and experienced by women, capturing tacit aspects of behavior that individuals might not consciously articulate, like spatial distribution, utilization patterns, the nature of interactions, etc. Integrating participant observation with the other methods enhanced the robustness of the research; this methodological triangulation strengthened the validity of the findings, providing a well-rounded view of the phenomena under study.

Details and Statistics. Participant observation was conducted on two separate occasions, once at Khyber Park and once at Shahi Bagh. Khyber Park, as a designated women-only space, offered insight into women's patterns of usage, interactions, and comfort levels within a gender-segregated space. Shahi Bagh, a historic public park in Peshawar city that formerly housed Pardah Bagh within its boundaries, provided a contrast as a mixed-use recreational space. This enabled a comparative reflection on behavioral norms, spatial navigation, and social dynamics across two different environments. Observations were audio-recorded using the researcher's

phone, capturing real-time interactions and behaviors. This data was then transcribed to ensure a detailed and accurate record of the observations made.

Sample and Participant Selection Justification. The participant observation did not involve direct interaction with the subjects being observed, which allowed for an unbiased look at natural behaviors without the influence of the researcher's presence. This method is particularly useful in sensitive settings where direct questioning might alter participant behavior. Observations were made during typical peak park hours in the afternoon and early evenings to ensure that a diverse sample of everyday activities and interactions was captured.

Language and Cultural Considerations. Although the observations were recorded and transcribed in English, the researcher's fluency in Urdu and Pashto ensured that any overheard conversations or interactions could be accurately understood and documented.

Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent. Given the non-intrusive nature of participant observation, informed consent from the observed subjects was not required for this method. Observations were conducted discreetly, and any potentially identifiable information was recorded to begin with. This approach was aligned with ethical research practices, ensuring that the privacy and dignity of the observed subjects were always maintained.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Data

The quantitative component of this study consisted of two structured surveys designed to capture women's experiences of two WOPS in Peshawar: the Parks Usage Survey (n = 187) and the Bus Usage Survey (n = 156). Both surveys included a combination of closed-ended and

open-ended questions, which provided numerical data on access, frequency of use, perceived convenience, motivations, and reported benefits. The Parks Usage survey also included an option to include qualitative elaborations, which enriched the interpretation. The aim was to establish measurable patterns in usage and perceptions, while also enabling statistical testing of relationships between demographic characteristics and accessibility outcomes.

A total of 61 Parks Usage Surveys were administered in person using printed survey sheets (34 at Khyber Park and 27 at Ladies Park). These responses were later manually entered into Microsoft Forms. Similarly, 53 Bus Usage Surveys were conducted in person and entered manually, but in this case, they were administered directly on the researcher's phone through Microsoft Forms in order to streamline the process and cater to the time constraints presented with commuting. This mixed approach to data collection broadened the respondent pool, capturing both women within the researcher's personal and professional networks, those with mobile access and digital literacy, and park users beyond these networks, including those with limited digital literacy or who would not otherwise have been aware of the study.

Both the surveys on Microsoft Forms, with the initial consent statement, each question, and all potential answers, were drafted and presented in two languages: English and Urdu. For quantitative items, categorical variables (such as frequency of park visits) were coded numerically, from 1 to 5, for ease of statistical analysis. Two optional open-ended questions in the Parks Usage Survey were also coded thematically into categories, presenting a structured interpretation of qualitative elaborations alongside numerical results.

Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize participant characteristics and key trends. For example, among park survey respondents ($n = 187$), the largest group (34.8%)

reported visiting parks “very infrequently,” while 18.2% reported daily visits. Similarly, in the bus survey (n = 156), 89.7% of women expressed a preference for gender-segregated public transport. Percentages, frequencies, and cross-tabulations were used to capture these broad patterns of use, while open-text responses provided further context on barriers such as overcrowding, distance, and lack of transportation.

To move beyond descriptive statistics, inferential methods were employed to test hypotheses about the relationship between demographics and accessibility. Correlation analyses were run using both Spearman’s rho and Pearson’s r. These analyses were conducted in MAXQDA 24, after the quantitative survey data had been exported from Microsoft Forms into Excel and then imported into MAXQDA 24 for further testing. Quantitative findings were not analyzed in isolation. Instead, they were integrated with qualitative interviews, focus groups, and participant observations to form a comprehensive, triangulated account.

Qualitative Data

The qualitative data consisted of nine semi-structured interviews with women in parks, two focus group discussions (FGDs), two expert interviews, and participant observations conducted at Khyber Park and Shahi Bagh. Additionally, open-ended responses from the Parks Usage Surveys (n = 187) were incorporated to enrich the thematic depth. The participant observation notes, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions were recorded on the phone, while expert interviews were recorded on Zoom. While the interviews occurred in three languages (English, Urdu, and Pashto), all interviews were translated and transcribed into English in order to streamline the process of data analysis and coding.

Interview transcripts and observation notes were imported into MAXQDA 24, where a codebook of 14 parent codes and 123 subcodes was developed inductively through an open coding process. Codes were then refined through iterative comparison, with overlapping concepts and phenomena being merged together under the same broader theme. The reliability was strengthened through constant revisiting of earlier transcripts to ensure coding consistency and identify previously uncoded excerpts. A thematic analysis approach was employed to interpret the qualitative data. Codes were clustered into higher-order themes that aligned with the research questions and objectives and analyzed as separate subheadings in Chapter 4 (Findings and Discussions) to achieve a systematic exploration of the dynamics of WOPS.

Data was actively triangulated across different sources, i.e., interviews, surveys, and observations, to validate findings and interpretations. For example, survey respondents highlighting “overcrowding” and “lack of female staff” as key concerns were triangulated with FGD narratives describing discomfort with male janitors or gardeners, and with observation notes that recorded women’s reluctance to unveil even within women-only parks. Another example of this is the recurring theme of conditional permissions, which was confirmed by both individual interviews and focus group exchanges, where women consistently tied mobility to male or familial approval, and expert accounts describing the position of women in society.

Reflexivity was also an essential part of the process. As a researcher with both insider and outsider positionalities, self-reflection and mediation on the impact of this background shaped interactions during the data collection process. For instance, differences in the Pashto dialect sometimes made women hesitant to speak freely. In contrast, my identity as a woman encouraged more openness in discussing issues of restrictions, modesty, and honor.

The interplay between quantitative data and qualitative narratives provided complementary support to different themes and patterns. As an example, while the regression analysis indicated that age was positively associated with convenience in visiting women-only parks, interviews were able to provide a potential explanation for this phenomenon: older women often enjoy greater autonomy within families and face fewer restrictions than younger women due to ingrained power dynamics. Hence, this integration allowed the study to balance numerical breadth with narrational depth, capturing both patterns and potential associated meanings.

Languages

Given the linguistic diversity of Pakistan, and particularly Peshawar in this case, data collection for this study was conducted in multiple languages to maximize inclusivity and ensure participants could express themselves in the language they felt most comfortable. The primary languages used were Pashto/Pukhto, Urdu, and English, depending on the setting and preference of participants.

In terms of qualitative data collection, the park-based semi-structured interviews were mainly conducted in Pashto, while participant observation field notes were recorded in English on a mobile device. The expert interviews were conducted in a mixture of English and Urdu, and the discussions in the focus groups incorporated all three languages. Both quantitative surveys included both English and Urdu texts. Due to the nature of the inquiry, enhancing the authenticity and depth of responses from respondents was vital; hence, this multilingual approach not only expanded the pool of accessible participants but also reduced educational and linguistic barriers for women. While translating, care was taken to preserve the cultural and

emotional nuance of expressions wherever possible, including the use of brackets to elaborate or indicate meanings.

My linguistic positionality also shaped the research process. Being a native Pashto speaker facilitated rapport with participants, as it reduced comfort barriers and the social distance between me and the women in the parks. However, I occasionally came across dialectical variations of Pashto that differed from my own localized style, which sometimes created initial hesitation or self-consciousness among participants. I navigated these challenges by adopting a flexible, conversational tone and using local anecdotal small talk to establish familiarity and presence with the respondents, sometimes at the expense of the interviews going off topic in the middle. My multilingualism also enabled me to remain attentive to and aware of the nuances that language carries in shaping meaning and power relations, which in turn influenced how I transcribed the interviews and coded the qualitative data thematically.

Chapter 4: Usage, Motivations & Benefits

The data analysis is structured into two chapters and five thematic sections, sourced from fourteen parent codes developed during the open coding process:

Chapter 4: Usage, Motivations & Benefits, includes:

- Introduction to Findings
- Patterns of Usage
- Motivations and Reported Benefits

Chapter 5: Patriarchy, Power & Politics of Space, includes:

- Patriarchy, Social Norms, and Systemic Barriers
- Critiques, Limitations, and Structural Challenges

Each chapter utilizes the data and insights collected to provide a multidimensional and multilayered understanding of the concepts being explored and women's experiences, allowing for a combination of narrational perspective and empirical evidence within the unique socio-cultural context of Peshawar, effectively triangulating data to ensure representativeness, reliability, and validity. The goal is to present an empirically grounded account of how women use, experience, and perceive these spaces, as well as the barriers, benefits, and broader societal implications associated with them.

Introduction to Findings

The findings presented in this chapter are drawn from a mixed-methods research design that integrates quantitative data from two surveys with qualitative narratives gathered through

small-group and individual semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), expert interviews, and participant observations.

While no identifier data was collected from the interview participants, basic data was collected from survey participants in order to derive key statistical analyses between different

Respondent Cities

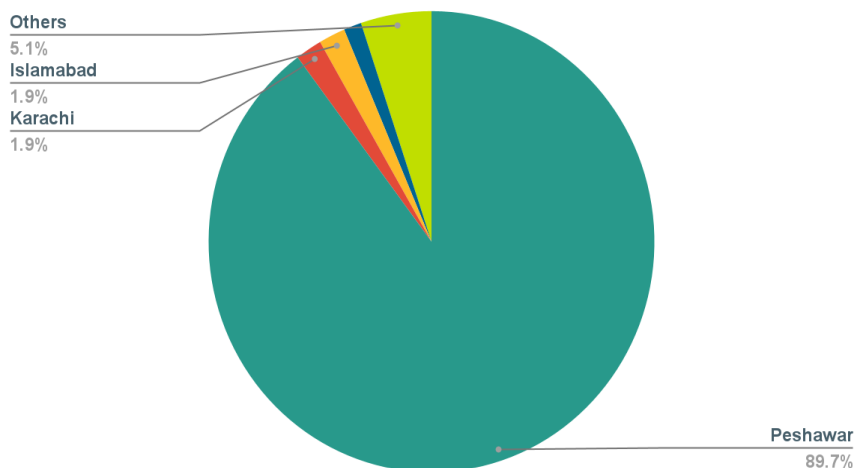


Figure 1: Parks Usage Survey Respondent Cities

variables. For the Parks Usage Survey, most respondents (n=165) resided in Peshawar, while some others were from other cities in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (n=6), cities from the province

of Sindh, e.g., Karachi and Hyderabad (n=10), and a few international residents (n=6). The ages of respondents ranged from 18 to 72 years old ($M = 30.8$, $SD = 12.4$). The majority of respondents (75%) were at or below 34 years old, with 25% at or below 23 years of age.

In terms of household income, most women identified themselves within the middle-income categories: 95 respondents placed their households in “middle-income class”, while 50 respondents identified as “upper-middle-income class”. Smaller numbers came from the lowest income groups (22 in “lower-middle-income class”, 5 in “lower-income class”) and higher-income groups (16 in “higher-income class”). This distribution denotes a participant pool more representative of lower- to middle-income families, with relatively fewer respondents at the extremes.

For the Bus Usage Survey, participants' ages ranged from 17 to 67 years ($M = 29.1$, $SD = 9.7$). The majority were also young adults, with 50% of the sample aged 25 or younger. In terms

Self-Described Household Financial Situation

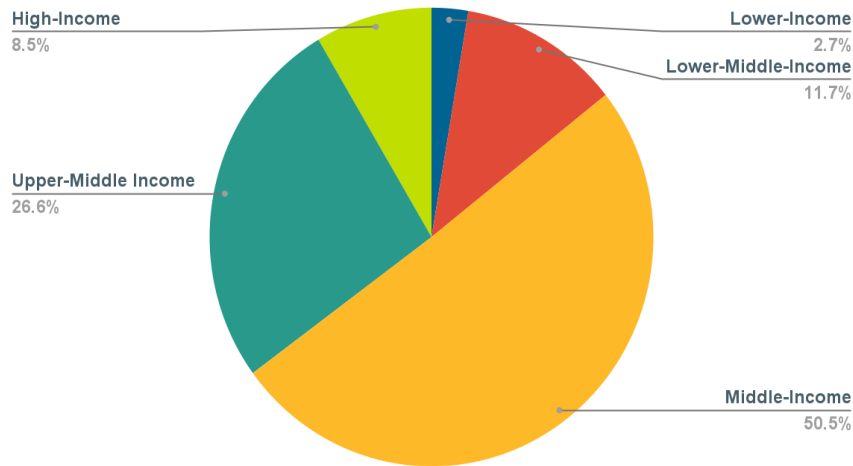


Figure 2: Parks Usage Survey Respondent Self-Described Household Financial Situation

of location, the large majority of respondents resided in Peshawar ($n=140$), while a handful came from other cities in Pakistan, such as Karachi ($n=3$), Islamabad ($n=3$), Lahore ($n=2$), and scattered smaller cities, along with cities outside of Pakistan ($n=3$). This shows the survey predominantly reflects the experiences of Peshawar-based women, aligning with the geographic scope of this research.

Patterns of Usage

Patterns of usage for women-only public spaces (WOPS) in Peshawar demonstrate distinct yet interconnected and correlated trends in recreational and transportation contexts.

Access & Frequency of Park Visits

Survey responses ($n = 187$) show varied engagement with women-only parks. The largest group of respondents (34.8%, $n = 65$) reported visiting “very infrequently”, followed by 25.1% ($n = 47$) who visited “somewhat frequently.” A smaller but notable group attended daily (18.2%,

n = 34), with 14.4% (n = 27) visiting “frequently” and 8% (n = 15) reporting “very frequent” visits.

How frequently do you visit women-only parks?

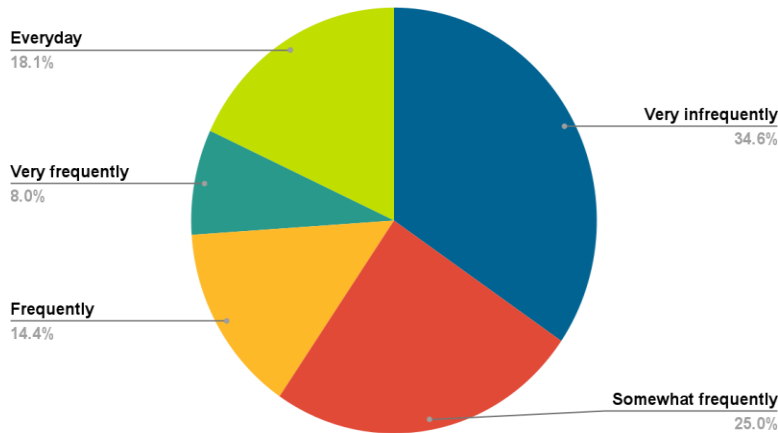


Figure 3: Result of Survey Question, "How frequently do you visit women-only parks?"

Qualitative insights, along with survey data, suggest that infrequent attendance is often linked to mobility constraints, family restrictions, or the need to coordinate with others for transport.

Conversely, daily visitors frequently lived near the parks

or had flexible household permissions, based on various factors, but most notably, the age of the participant. One SGD participant stated:

Res How often do you visit this park in a month?

P1 We are here almost every day. The only times we miss are when we have guests at home or when we are attending a wedding event. Otherwise, we never miss a day.

R Do you live nearby?

P1 Yes, we live in Phase 1 (a residential housing sector in Hayatabad). We live in closed houses, and sometimes we cannot spend another minute there. We are very happy that we can come here.

P2 Yes, even our doctor recommended a daily walk for our leg cramps.

For others, infrequent visits were framed as a negotiation between desire, affordability, and accessibility. Parks Survey respondents (n = 187) were asked, in an open-text answer, to describe the biggest inconvenience, if any, of visiting women-only parks. Their responses were then coded mainly into nine subcodes, with the largest to smallest being “No Inconvenience” (33.51%, n = 63), followed by “Distance” (14.36%, n = 27), “Responsibilities” (12.23%, n = 23), “Scarcity” (10.64%, n = 20), “No/Lack of Transportation” (7.98%, n = 15), “Unsafe/Uncomfortable to Navigate Area Outside of the Park” (5.85%, n = 11), “Permission/Restrictions” (5.85%, n = 11), “Personal Reasons” (5.32%, n = 10), and “Other Reasons (weather, etc.)” (4.26%, n = 8).

If you don't depend on someone else, what is the biggest inconvenience of accessing these parks?

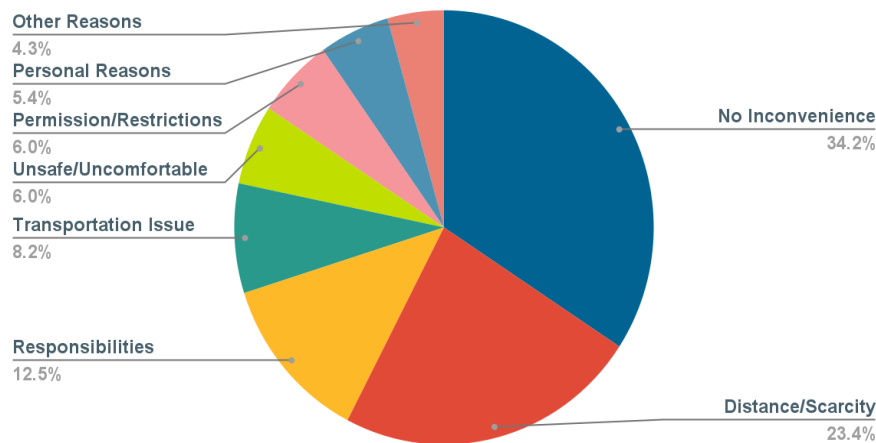


Figure 4: Result of Survey Question, "If you don't depend on someone else, what is the biggest inconvenience of accessing these parks?"

If analyzed collectively due to overlap, scarcity of parks, transportation issues, and distance from parks suggest the same, overlapping type of accessibility issue; together, they make up the largest inconvenience

reported by female park-goers, at 33% (n = 62). Several SGD participants at the parks explained as follows:

Res How frequently do you visit that park in a week?

P1 Oh no, we cannot visit that park every week. It's slightly far from our home and

requires a car ride.

Res How many times do you visit that park in a month?

P1 Once a month

Res So, if the park were nearby, you would visit it more often?

P1 Absolutely! If it were closer, we would visit it daily.

And:

Res If you had easier access to these parks, would you go there more often?

P1 Yes, if there were one nearby, I would go there every day.

Res And if you had a better transportation option, would you also visit there more often

P1 Yes, definitely. Depending on others is inconvenient.

Transportation Preferences and Gender-Segregated Mobility

Do you prefer traveling using mixed-gendered transportation services or gender-segregated ones?

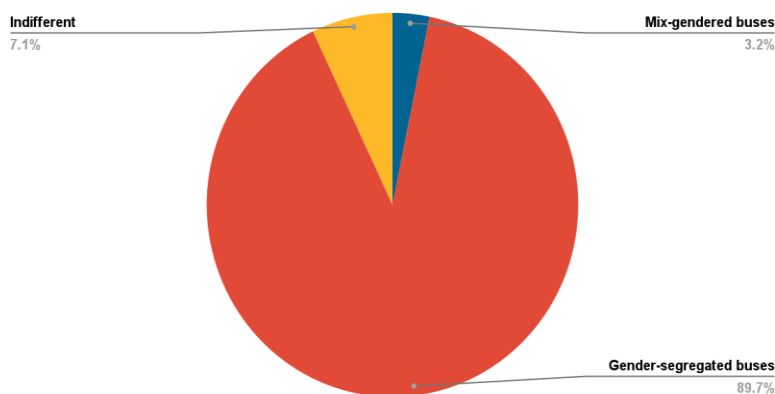


Figure 5: Result of Survey Question, "Do you prefer travelling using mixed-gendered transportation services or gender-segregated ones?"

The bus usage survey (n = 156) revealed an overwhelming preference for gender-segregated public transport: 89.7% (n = 140) favored it over mixed-gender services, with only 3.2% (n = 5) preferring mixed-gender options and 7.1% (n = 11)

expressing no preference. For numerous participants, the introduction of the Bus Rapid Transit

(BRT) service meant increased accessibility, ease of transportation, and an affordable alternative to using taxis or mixed local bus services. As quoted by one participant:

Yes, it is very safe and respectful. I don't trust Taxi drivers, but BRT is very secure. I go more frequently now as well. Sometimes we just need an excuse to use it and get out of the house. It's so cheap, back then we'd have to wait for a taxi, and it would be so expensive. Now the BRT bus goes everywhere, which makes it really easy to go to places that are farther away.

Age and Demographic Patterns

A series of correlation and regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between perceived convenience of visiting women-only parks, age, household income level, and frequency of visits.

Spearman's correlation indicated a small-to-moderate positive association between age and convenience, $\rho = .25$, $p < .001$, suggesting that older respondents (aged 50 and above) generally reported finding it easier or more feasible to visit women-only parks. Pearson's correlation produced a similar result, $r = .24$, $p = .001$, when the variables were treated as continuous. The simple linear regression model confirmed this relationship, $b = 0.024$, $p = .001$, with age explaining approximately 5.7% of the variance in perceived convenience ($R^2 = .057$). This finding suggests multiple explanations, including that as age increases, women might become more familiar with park locations, have increased agency and autonomy in movement, or experience fewer competing demands on their time, hence, perceiving such visits as more convenient.

The intersectionality that comes into play with the participant's age was also observed during interviews at the parks, where this exchange within the same group showed a disparity in how women of different ages perceived accessibility, mobility and family restrictions:

Res What if male members of your family accompany you to those mixed parks?

P3 No, we still can't go there.

P2 Why not? If men accompany us, then we can go there.

P3 You can because you're old, we are young, that's why we are not allowed to visit those parks.

This conversation between a middle-aged woman, roughly aged between 30-45 years, and an older woman, aged between 65-75 years, of the same household group shows the variety in lived experiences even within the same family unit. In terms of intersectionality, age has repeatedly shown itself, whether through the quantitative data or interviews, as a factor influencing mobility, access and agency.

In contrast, no statistically significant relationship was observed between household income level and perceived convenience of accessing parks (Spearman's $\rho = .10$, $p = .181$; Pearson's $r = .09$, $p = .222$). The regression model similarly found no predictive effect of income on convenience, $b = 0.130$, $p = .222$, $R^2 = .008$. These results could indicate that financial resources, as operationalized by self-reported income group, are not a major determinant of whether respondents find it convenient to access women-only parks. This alternatively can also suggest that the primary barriers or facilitators to convenience could be more structural, such as location, availability of public transportation, and safety, rather than purely economic. However, it is essential to note that due to the lower response rates from higher-income and lower-income

women (8.5% and 2.7%, respectively), these results are not entirely representative and should be replicated with a more diverse group of respondents.

Finally, visit frequency was positively associated with convenience. Spearman's correlation showed a small but significant relationship, $\rho = .20$, $p = .007$, which was consistent with Pearson's $r = .18$, $p = .015$. The regression model indicated that for each one-unit increase in perceived convenience, frequency of visits increased by 0.151 units, $b = 0.151$, $p = .015$, with convenience explaining 3.1% of the variance in frequency ($R^2 = .031$). These findings suggest a potential reciprocal relationship: women who perceive visiting women-only parks as convenient may be more likely to go often, and conversely, frequent visits may lead to greater familiarity with routes, schedules, and facilities, which in turn enhances the perception of convenience. Moreover, the association between convenience and frequency also suggests that women's repeated engagement with these parks, when convenient, indicates an exercise of agency and a consciously positive valuation of such spaces.

This finding is crucial for two reasons. First, it confirms that the availability of structural ease and logistical resources is positively associated with women's ability to participate in public life. Even minor improvements like reliable transportation access, shorter distances, increased prevalence, etc., can translate into more frequent use of WOPS and services. Second, it reaffirms that empowerment and mobility are not only shaped by cultural or familial permission but also by resources and the practical infrastructure of cities and urban centers. If convenience is lacking, even women who are otherwise permitted to go out will remain restricted, often by their own choice. On the other hand, making convenience a developmental priority and making mobility more accessible would lower the threshold of efforts or negotiation needed, enabling women to integrate a higher public presence more seamlessly into their lives.

Motivations, Accessibility & Reported Benefits

The motivations driving women's engagement with WOPS in Peshawar, and the benefits they derive from them, showcase a complex interplay of safety, comfort, social connection, well-being, and agency.

Safety and Security as Primary Drivers

Safety was the most consistently cited reason for engagement with WOPS. In the parks survey (n = 188), 87.7% of respondents reported visiting because of safety concerns. Among

Do you use gender-segregated buses because you feel safer in them?

No, but other reasons
3.2%

Yes, but also other
21.2%

No
1.9%

Yes
73.7%

Figure 6: Result of Survey Question, "Do you use gender-segregated buses because you feel safer in them?"

using them for safety in combination with other reasons.

these, 31.4% said they felt completely safe, 52.61% felt safer than in mixed-gender parks, and only 4.3% reported no difference. The bus survey (n = 156) reflected similar trends: 73.7% used gender-segregated buses primarily for safety, with another 21.2%

How safe does being in a women-only park make you feel compared to mixed-gendered public parks?

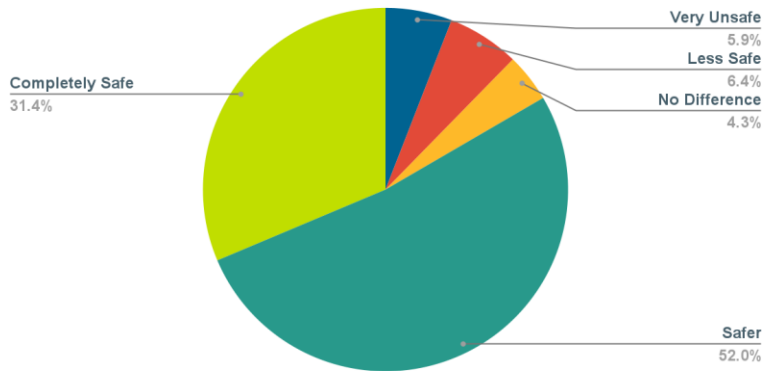


Figure 7: Result of Survey Question, "How safe does being in a women-only park make you feel compared to mixed-gender public parks?"

Participants often described safety and security as a major precondition for accessing public spaces through the gender-segregated BRT buses, with this expert linking the gender-segregated compartments in the BRT to

affirmative actions, emphasizing it as a precondition to achieving growth through equitable interventions:

The actual concept of these women-only spaces is that you carve out space for women; you give them an opportunity to progress. If you hadn't assigned space on the BRT for women, women would never have been able to travel on the BRT. You gave them the opportunity by offering them that space and told them that they were safe to access it; as a result, it became easier for women to commute.

On the other hand, an SGD participant expressed feeling safe in the "judgement-free" park:

I have said this before, I feel safer there. It's a judgment-free zone. When I visit these parks, I don't worry about being judged by men based on my looks or physical appearance. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, men often harass women for these reasons, but in women-only parks, I'm free from those concerns.

Comfort, Relaxation, and Freedom from Surveillance

Quantitative findings show that 88.2% of park users felt more relaxed and at ease in WOPS, citing freedom from the constant vigilance required in mixed-gender parks. Several participants described these parks as places where they could “breathe freely” and “sit how we want” without fear of judgment or harassment. One interviewee reflected:

I feel significantly safer in women-only spaces compared to mixed areas. I am more comfortable and safe here, unlike other areas in Pakistan where men often make me feel uneasy. I prefer women-only spaces.

Another participant expressed the park’s ability to enhance holistic wellbeing:

I come here for peace, and I enjoy visiting this park. At home, we tend to get bored. The houses are small, and we work all day from morning to afternoon. So, when we leave our house, I tend to freshen up. When you are at home, it does not make a difference whether you’re groomed or not, but when we think about coming to the park, we tend to think about our clothes, shoes, everything. After coming here, I feel relaxed enough to last another week (at home).

During conversations with several interviewees, both at the parks and during FGDs, participants cited feeling suffocated and confined in their homes. Various participants highlighted the difference between the sizes of their homes in their villages and the houses in Peshawar, frequently describing them as smaller and more constrictive. Peshawar, relatively recently urbanized, continues to accommodate high levels of urban migration; due to issues surrounding resources and capacity (Mosel & Jackson, 2013), living accommodations in various parts of the

city are modestly sized, leading to dissatisfaction from individuals used to experiencing rural life. One participant made a comparison of her house in Peshawar to her home in the village:

When I leave my house and come here, I feel a big improvement in my mental health; my mind feels open. Actually, our village house in Lakki Marwat has better weather and ventilation; the house here in Peshawar is very closed, and it gets very hot even under the fan. Over there, I could get fresh air, and I would also walk around.

These participants explained:

P3 They're (parks) very beneficial. Visiting this park is good; it keeps our blood circulating and our hearts unburdened. Our homes can be confining; sometimes it's suffocating. Coming here saves us from that. We head back feeling tired but refreshed, take a shower, and dress down, and that is when we start to like being at home. The next morning, we are just waiting for the afternoon so we can leave again.

P2 When it is 2 pm, we're waiting for 3 pm. And when it's 3 pm, we're counting down to 4 pm so we can leave.

When conducting FGDs, I prompted the group to share their experiences with WOPS, and particularly parks, to include a richer perspective of their dynamics. One FGD participant shared:

What I remember is that my mom, my aunt, and all of us cousins used to go there and just relax. I used to see women from all sorts of conservative backgrounds, even women as conservative as Afghan women... they used to come there with their kids. It was a place where they could just relax, lie back, and enjoy it with their kids. The only sounds were just happy sounds all around. There were kids laughing and running around... it would be

a happy environment overall. You could actually tell that the women felt calm and relaxed in that space, but that was the only space.

Socialization and Informal Support Networks

Socialization emerged as a key benefit. 80.7% of park respondents reported socializing with other women during their visits; of these, 27.7% did so *frequently* and 15.3% *very frequently*. Exploration of this idea during interviews revealed that these spaces also present in themselves opportunities for trust and support-based networks. While sharing their experiences of women-only parks in the United Arab Emirates, one FGD participant explained:

It was such a big community, so much cultural diversity... women used to come there, have a big gossip, chats, partying, do gender reveals, so many celebrations going on. It was sort of like a hotel only for females; the concept was so strong over there of female parks and communities. I used to enjoy it, we all used to enjoy it, and because maybe we were children back then, that's why we used to enjoy it so much and not be so busy. We would look forward every Friday to going there and having a chat with our friends and families, relatives, and not even if they were close relatives, but we still had so much fun and enjoyment over there. We used to discuss so many different themes, whether it was regarding our own families or something that had happened in the nearby areas, or something regarding the policies over there. But it was our me-time basically for us over there, so I had a good time over there.

These spaces also demonstrate the potential for developing networks based on different factors, including religion, ethnicity, dialects, etc. Participants often described recognizing people from their own villages after overhearing them speak Pashto in their own regional dialect. During the

data collection process, which involved site visits to these women-only parks, numerous women were observed sitting in variously sized groups, engaging in discussions and partaking in food-related activities, including sharing tea and passing around homemade foods in Tupperware. One participant talked about the socialization aspect as also a means of staying updated about the people within the community, indicating to the park's ability to provide space for community-focused inquiries:

P1 We just want our hearts to feel free and unburdened. We look around and socialize with others, especially if we see people from our *Pukhto watan* (Pashtun nation). There are a lot of Afghans here, a lot of migrants, many people from Lakki Marwat, Banusis (people of Bannu). Everyone recognizes each other from their languages. Unfortunately, we rarely meet others from our Afridi community here, only around 15-20 women. Typically, we visit on Fridays and Sundays because there is *dars* (religious lecture). We didn't come yesterday, but we felt frustrated today, so we decided to visit today.

Res Do you like interacting with other women here?

P1 Yes, if they are from our village. It helps us stay updated about other people, such as whether anyone is sick.

Another interviewee shared her experience of coincidentally interacting with someone from their village:

Yes, yes! Even today, the moment we entered the park, we bumped into another Pashtun family, just like ours. We chatted for a while, and they asked us about our hometown and

where we live now. We told them we are from Tirah (a village in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) and currently live near Naseer Teaching Hospital, close to the board. And that's how we connected, based on our shared locales.

And another participant expressed, “I also like it here. I see Marwat (Pakhtun tribe) people here, I walk around with them, and then we sit together and talk.”

Along with locale-based interactions, socialization within the parks can also take more objective-oriented forms, like establishing relationships for match-making purposes:

Yes, I have observed people make connections, exchange numbers, and establish relationships. In a lot of cases, I have even seen people do successful matchmaking; I’ve seen it myself.

Following data collection in women-only parks and the sharing of preliminary findings with the second FGD group, numerous participants reemphasized the importance of the socialization aspect of visiting women-only parks. Understanding the religio-cultural dynamics impacting the larger society and having a familiarity with the extent of women’s disempowerment in various contexts, several participants highlighted longer-term implications and advantages of these interactions, stating:

And, for your cognitive expansion, it's really good. Like, at least, you learn from each other. And see, if a girl, for example, wants to go to *Naran* or *Kaghan* (popular tourist destinations in Northern Pakistan), but she feels that it's a sin to take a girl there. But she comes here, sits here, and sees the girl who went with the girls. She sees the girl who forces her husband to take her there. Because, in these families, they can't even say to

take us. So, she sees her and says, at least, she's doing this. So, it means it's possible and it's not a sin. Tomorrow, not once, not twice, but the third time, she'll say it with courage.

Another participant also highlighted the role it can play in the dissemination of ideas and perspectives:

And see, in public spaces for women, they're going to meet each other. Different backgrounds. Ideas will be shared. See, today, we've learnt so much about each other. Before this, I had just joined a university. I had just joined a corner. After I did, my family found out that there are such things too.... Similarly, in public spaces, you meet different people. You get to know different things. This is a great opportunity to create.

Physical and Mental Well-being

Women-only parks play a significant role in supporting both physical and mental health. 84.0% of respondents visited for physical health reasons, with over a third engaging in exercise daily or very frequently. Mental health benefits were even more widely reported: 91.4% visited to improve mental health, and 94.1% visited to relax.

These quantitative patterns align with qualitative accounts recorded through my interviews within the parks, where most respondents continued to emphasize the positive impacts of accessing women-only parks in their area. When asked about their motivation to visit women-only parks, several participants discussed feeling better in their “hearts” after leaving their homes, often described as suffocating and isolating, to visit women-only parks. Many Pashtun women expressed this affective shift using the Pashto phrases “*zra azaad shi*” (the heart becomes free), “*zra halka shi*” (the heart becomes lighter), and “*zra khushala shi*” (the heart

becomes happy). While literal translations reference the “heart,” these expressions carry strong connotations of mental and emotional well-being in Pashto, functioning as idioms of distress and relief. Such phrasing highlights how participants articulate their psychological state through culturally-influenced metaphors that position the heart as the symbol of emotion, freedom, and happiness. Drawing on anthropological frameworks of idioms of distress (Kohrt & Hruschka, 2010), such metaphoric language provides culturally meaningful ways for women to articulate mental issues in environments that may otherwise suppress emotional expression. In Pakistan too, ethnopsychological studies have identified how psychological connotations are embedded in idioms involving “heart,” “mind,” and the “spirit”, particularly among rural and less medically-oriented populations (Sabri, 2018) Thus, the women’s reported “lightening of heart” in park spaces reflects both personal and cultural expressions of emotional freedom and mental well-being in the face of restrictive domestic conditions. Here are a few accounts of women interviewed at the parks:

Yes, because you know, by staying at home, you feel isolated from the world. We start to feel frustrated, feeling the desire to go out, see other people and women, which can give your heart a lot of hope and relief. It gives me the will to live. A person can then focus on themselves as well; when you’re at home, you neglect yourself.

And:

Visiting parks makes me feel great. Sitting at home isn’t very healthy; it creates so many health problems. Going there, being around plants and nature, makes my heart feel unburdened and improves my mental health.

And:

Being at home can feel suffocating and sad; we come here and get some fresh air, see one another, and make friends. Coming here distracts us, it changes our focus to better things, and our hearts are happier. Coming here kills time as well; at home, you run out of things to do at some point, then you're just sitting in a closed space.

After revealing preliminary findings during park interviews, a FGD respondent discussed the lack of mental health awareness in Peshawar, expanding on the park's role as an outlet for mental frustrations as observed during her visits to other women-only parks:

The women could just... come in and relax; they would mostly just vent about their troubles and everything, which is necessary because in Pakistan, none of us really have any concept of mental health, so it really is the only way they can let their feelings out is by talking to other women. Even if the other women are dumping their own traumas on them as well, it is still some sort of release for them.

Beyond the emotional relief associated with women-only parks, participants also emphasized improvements in their physical health. Many women spoke about dealing with chronic illnesses such as hypertension and diabetes, conditions that are widely prevalent among women in Pakistan. One woman shared:

These last 15 days, I've had a bad headache, my blood pressure wasn't coming down. My husband told me that we had heard from someone that walking barefoot in a garden helps. I was in bad shape, but I still went out and walked in a mixed park; it was only for 5-10 minutes, but I believe it now because my head felt better afterwards.

Another participant explained how her diagnosis of diabetes motivated her to begin regular park visits:

We have been living here for 9 years. Initially, I didn't visit this park often for a few years because my husband wouldn't let me. But now, after being diagnosed with diabetes 5 years ago, I began coming here once a week; my husband is okay with it.

Such narratives align with existing research that highlights the high prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as hypertension and diabetes among women in Pakistan (Basit et al., 2018). Women's accounts of feeling a positive impact on their physical well-being through walking in women-only parks align with concerns identified by Khalid (2023), who documented how socio-cultural, familial, and religious norms, including modesty expectations, restrict women's public mobility and discourage physical activity in Pakistan. These restrictions lead to sedentary behavior, increasing risks for hypertension, diabetes, and other NCDs. In line with this, the participants visiting these parks are not merely managing symptoms but also countering structural barriers to health. Similarly, the woman who began park visits after her diabetes diagnosis shows how these spaces may serve as important interventions against lifestyle-related health conditions within a context where veiling and mobility restrictions otherwise limit access to exercise.

Expanded Participation and Agency

Among bus users, 93.6% preferred gender-segregated services, 93.5% felt good about traveling independently, and 83.3% stated that bus access had improved their quality of life by enabling work, errands, or leisure outside the home. During a discussion about accessibility, one FGD participant shared the impact of public transportation on her mobility:

I must say that BRT has made a huge contribution to women's development, both for men and for women. Maybe I wouldn't be able to do my job without BRT. The dynamic of the job, two spaces at one time (this participant's work required her to frequent between two locations), is all possible because of that. It's the safest mode of transport I can go for.

The survey data and FGD testimony are in line with studies conducted in various cities and contexts around the world. Results have shown that gender-responsive transit, be it gender-segregated modes or gender-exclusive, reduces safety concerns and enables women's purposeful mobility for work, errands, and leisure. Studies conducted by the World Resources Institute, Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), and TransPeshawar report that the Peshawar BRT's dedicated women's sections are linked to a sharp rise in female ridership; women constitute around 20%-30% of BRT passengers, up from around 2% on pre-BRT public transport (ITDP, 2022), and system documents also report up to a 10% increase in women's employment, both indicative of improved access and inclusion (Gongadze & Maassen, 2023).

Similar results have also been observed across regions. According to a study conducted on women's mobility and labor supply in Lahore, offering women a women-only commute option almost doubled their job application rate; at a 50% fare subsidy, the application rate tripled, and at a 75% subsidy, it quadrupled. Moreover, when half of job ads included a transport offer, the probability that a woman applied to any job increased by about 10%, a clear indicator that safe, easily accessible, and socially acceptable mobility enables active labor search among "latent" job seekers (Field & Vyborny, 2022). Similarly, in Delhi, a study found that distance and proximity to metro stations are connected to a statistically significant increase in women's

work participation. Doubling the distance to the nearest metro station resulted in a 0.558 percentage-point decrease in women's work participation (Seki & Yamada, 2020).

In urban centers with endemic harassment issues, gender-informed transit options are frequently justified by safety disparities. In Cairo, Egypt, surveys indicated that more than 80% of women experience harassment along the journey chain of public transportation systems, influencing BRT planning and transport policies of adopting women-only sections. Conversely, evidence from interventions in higher-income countries also suggests similar data. In Tokyo, for example, same-sex train carriages were introduced to address widespread issues of harassment, and surveys revealed that nearly 70% of women supported these interventions, with a considerable share reporting that they now travel with greater confidence and less fear of assault (Yi & Reid, 2018).

This highlights that such measures are not merely cultural accommodations for conservative or religio-social "traditional" societies but are pragmatic strategies that respond to systemic issues of safety. By reducing chances for harassment and increasing perceived safety, women-only transport expands women's "effective motility", i.e., their ability to move not just physically but socially and economically through public space (Kaufmann et al., 2004). Taken together, the evidence suggests that women-only transport in conservative societies like Pakistan is not an isolated cultural anomaly but part of a broader global trend of addressing gendered mobility constraints. For Peshawar's respondents, the positive perception and high usage of BRT's gender-segregated facilities showcase both a desire for safe and independent public presence and a redefinition of mobility as agency and participatory empowerment. In this way, such transport measures extend beyond mere convenience: they actively enable and facilitate

women's participation in the labor market, access to health and education, and overall quality of life.

A key benefit reported by 89.8% of park users was the ability to participate in more activities, such as picnics, jogging, and photography, compared to mixed-gender spaces. Moreover, despite various barriers, numerous women described how accessing women-only parks has made them more confident and comfortable with mobility in the general public. This could have many reasons, ranging from establishing familiarity with navigating the public to a constant negotiation of boundaries and a gradual strengthening of self-assurance. As one respondent reflected:

Yeah, when we were new here, we used to be scared, because we were just girls. But now, when we come here, Alhamdulillah, with God's mercy, we have the confidence to know that we can go. We take the taxi frequently; the only problem is that we have never taken the Metro here.

Another participant similarly emphasized, "Whether someone is there or not, I'm completely comfortable visiting the park by myself. I can walk, sit, and rest, and then go back home whenever I want."

These narratives are indicative of how women-only parks not only function as recreational spaces or spaces for leisure, but also as transitional arenas of empowerment, enabling women to rehearse mobility practices that extend into the broader public sphere. Familiarity with independent movement, such as commuting to and from the park or other places of socially acceptable access like *Saddar* (a shopping bazaar in Peshawar frequented by women), appears to translate into confidence in other mobility domains, a concept parallel to Kaufmann's

(2004) notion of motility as both capacity and practice. The women's perspectives and survey data collectively indicate that safe, gender-segregated spaces potentially provide opportunities to incrementally challenge patriarchal constraints by creating embodied experiences of autonomy, hence, converting "latent motility capital" into "realized mobility." In this sense, parks serve as places of negotiation where women learn to claim space, normalize their visibility in a limited public, and potentially reframe their relationship to the wider urban environment.

Accessibility and "Only Resort" Nature

For many women, women-only parks represented not just a preferred option, but often the only accessible public alternative, shaped by a complex web of constraints including proximity, transport availability, and familial approval. One participant remarked:

We live nearby, close to PDA. Yes, other women from my neighborhood also come here.

In fact, with the BRT bus service making transportation easier, women from farther areas like Saddar also come to visit.

This is another recorded advantage of the BRT: the expansion of geographic accessibility, drawing users from previously unreachable neighborhoods. Another respondent captured the usability of the park in contrast to insufficient alternatives:

Absolutely, there should be (more places we can access). We do not go anywhere else, like Ghani Bagh (mixed park) or any other park; we can only come here. If there were other options besides this park, we would definitely visit them. Unfortunately, whether we want to or not, this is our only option, which is why we're here.

The narrative of constraint and familiar restrictions is reinforced by the experience of a woman from Lakki Marwat:

No, I do not go to other places... due to restrictions, we're not allowed to go places where there are men. But since this is a female-only park, we're permitted to come here, and my daughter can accompany me, too.

Such narratives are similar to other qualitative findings on how *purdah* (veiling) and restrictive cultural norms limit women's collective mobility; WOPS can circumvent, but also highlight these exclusionary dynamics (Ammari et al., 2022; Sajjad et al., 2018). These constraints and their navigable alternatives often mirror patterns observed in public transport. According to the G²LM|LIC policy brief, women-only services such as the "Pink Bus" in Lahore allow for mobility by alleviating concerns about harassment; 90% of men who otherwise restricted women's access to public and mobility expressed comfort with them traveling alone using women-only transport. Extending this into recreational spaces further reveals how women-only parks can relieve burdens created by male-dominated public domains that typically exclude or policewomen's presence.

During my interview with the academic expert, the "only resort" framing was highlighted again by emphasizing the structural trade-offs embedded in WOPS. She explained:

A very bright girl's academic career can be nipped in the bud if she does not have an all-girls school or an all-girls college... So, for me, it is better that she goes to an all-girls school or college just to get an education rather than her education stopping at metric just because, you know, girls' colleges are there. I mean, it is good to have a co-ed. It disciplines both men and women, because a co-ed actually teaches both men and women

how to coexist. But then in our culture, a lot of girls, once they reach the age of puberty, are not allowed to go if the school or the college or any institution isn't there.

This illustrates a key contradiction: while segregated spaces are valued for enabling access, their existence also reflects the systemic exclusion of women from mixed or mainstream public institutions.

Would you travel this frequently if the gender-segregated buses stopped operating?

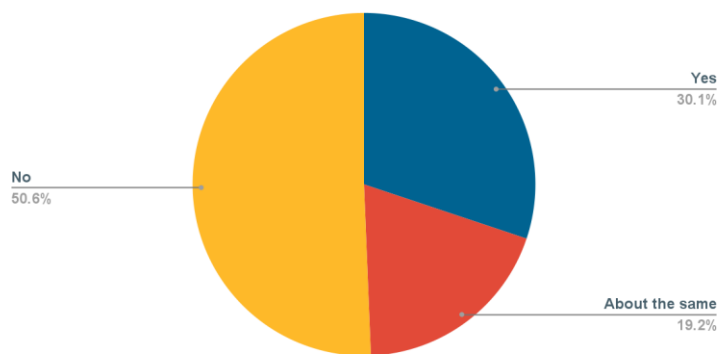


Figure 8: Result of Survey Question, "Would you travel this frequently if the gender-segregated buses stopped operating?"

Survey data also provide further evidence of this reliance on the public transportation level. 90% of the bus survey respondents (n = 156) stated that they preferred travelling in gender-segregated buses; moreover, when asked if they would travel that frequently if the

gender-segregated buses stopped operating, 51% of the respondents responded "No."

Women-only parks function as default options within the highly constrained gendered mobility landscape of Peshawar and other similar conservative cities. They provide essential, oftentimes only, entry points into public life, where mobility can be rehearsed and simulated safely. Though these spaces provide important accessibility, they also expose the systemic failure of various decision-making entities to accommodate women. Their very necessity emphasizes structural barriers and highlights the gap between token women-only initiatives and broader, more sustainable, inclusive urban placemaking.

Societal and Symbolic Significance

WOPS and their significance extend beyond the immediate experiences of safety, access, or mobility. During my interviews with experts, they repeatedly framed this issue and these spaces through the lens of affirmative measures, similar to forms of positive discrimination designed to achieve substantive equality. As one expert explained, I'll reiterate a quote from before:

The actual concept of these women-only spaces is that you carve out space for women; you give them an opportunity to progress. If you hadn't assigned space on the BRT for women, women would never have been able to travel on it. You gave them the opportunity by offering them that space and told them that they were safe to access it; as a result, it became easier for women to commute. The idea is equity as affirmative action, so they can move forward from their existing position in society.

As also emphasized by the expert themselves, this idea is in line with the commitments outlined in CEDAW, where substantive equality requires macro-level structural support rather than formal equality alone. Reserved seats in politics, women's schools and universities in various cities in Pakistan, and the BRT women's section are examples of how these initiatives institutionalize presence and participation. By carving out room for women in spaces they are otherwise excluded from, these initiatives do more than provide access: they build pathways into decision-making structures.

The campaign run in the 1990s and 2000s by feminist activists to reserve 33% seats for women in local government is an important example of this concept. As one expert recounted,

the entry of 44,000 women councilors into local bodies was “a social revolution in itself.” The expert elaborated:

You must have heard of Kamla Bhasin; she’s a very famous South Asian feminist who is also one of our mentors. We were meeting at a dinner and told her about how we were able to get the 33% seats. She said this sentence, and I still think it is entirely correct, that “without a social revolution, these reserved seats will not be entirely beneficial for women.” To some extent, she was right; however, most of the women-friendly legislation that has happened in Pakistan since has happened because of these reserved seats.

The point raised holds true; in order for a social revolution to achieve its intended goal, it needs to be supplemented by longer-term structural and systemic changes that facilitate its effective implementation. The expert further discussed:

In the 2000 local elections, 44,000 women became councilors... But when the system changed (change of government) and everything wound up, progress stopped as usual. Pakistan is problematic, sure. But KP (Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province in Pakistan)? My God, KP’s problems are next level. That is why these affirmative measures move slowly, but definitely not gradually. That is why these things come to a halt, but sometimes they do not just halt, they bounce back so aggressively that they take women even farther back.

However, as the expert warned, affirmative measures in Pakistan are not only fragile but also susceptible to backlash. This is known as “backlash politics” in feminist political science, a phenomenon in which perceived threats to the status quo or existing power hierarchies, e.g., gender reforms, trigger reactionary measures that worsen exclusions (Krook, 2017). In the case

of Pakistan, the reversal of such measures has repeatedly been observed, primarily in the legislative sphere; in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, resistance has often been even more severe, with reported cases revealing accounts where women were prevented from voting in entire constituencies through collusion between political parties and local male clergy (Critelli, 2010; Mufti & Jalalzai, 2021). In Peshawar and KP at large, these restrictions are justified under the cultural rhetoric of *ghairat* (honor), revealing the detrimental interaction of cultural honor codes and political structures that restrict women and their political participation. Talking about this phenomenon, one expert recalled:

There were local government elections in Nowshera, and we were fighting against the practice of not allowing women to participate in the voting process. We got a call at night that in a certain place, the *jirga* (council of elders) had decided not to allow women to vote. We involved the D.C. (Deputy Commissioner) and the Election Commission. The Election Commission called the D.C. and told him not to let the blockage happen. The next day, the blockage did not happen. But, what did happen was that all the women's polling stations were so hounded with men that women could not cast their votes. That is why I say the patriarchy is 10 steps ahead of us, because it has already planned how to counter the measures that are being taken against it, like how to use religion to their advantage, how to make it into a political issue, etc.

Looking at these spaces and initiatives as affirmative platforms that capacitate women with various soft and hard skills as indispensable starting points is an important step in acknowledging the potential short-term and long-term benefits that they can cultivate; however, it is also important to acknowledge that such measures alone may not in themselves dismantle the patriarchal power structures embedded in everyday social structures. For example, a study by

Mufti & Jalalzai (2021) indicates that women in Pakistan rarely win or are allowed to contest on non-reserved seats. “Patriarchy remains a pervasive feature in Pakistan and limits women’s access to patronage networks. Party elites tend to question women’s perceived qualifications to successfully contest non-reserved seats.” (p.107)

Even within that context, it cannot be looked at in total isolation without acknowledging the shorter-term impact of these measures. They provide women with a foothold in political and social spaces, creating a critical mass and representation in decision-making that can, over time, shift the policy agenda toward women-friendly legislation, as was the case with the impact of the 33% reserved seats (Bari et al., 2010; Critelli, 2010).

Chapter 5: Patriarchy, Power & Politics of Space

Patriarchy, Social Norms, and Systemic Barriers

Women-only public spaces (WOPS) in Peshawar do not exist in isolation; they are embedded within a larger socio-cultural framework that shapes both their accessibility and the experiences of women who use them. This framework is upheld by patriarchal power relations, culturally and religiously dictated social expectations, and the internalization of these norms by women themselves. The combination of these factors means that while WOPS can facilitate mobility and participation, they also reflect, and sometimes reinforce, the very systems of control they are meant to mitigate.

Patriarchal Oversight and Conditional Permissions

Access to women-only parks and buses is often contingent on male or family approval, reflecting deeply rooted exclusion from decision-making and gendered double standards. Decisions about the design, location, and management of public spaces are typically made without women's input, while cultural norms continue to position women's mobility as subject to male consent.

Bus survey findings reinforce this pattern: while 89.7% of respondents said their families were more comfortable with them traveling in gender-segregated transportation, this comfort was contingent on the segregation itself, showing that mobility remains conditional rather than absolute. This is supported by findings from qualitative narratives, which reveal the same notion, i.e., this independence is acceptable only within the framework of segregation. During my interviews at the parks, all the groups I interviewed, in one form or another, explained that they

have restrictions on their mobility and access to the public, and required permission from the men of the household. In most instances, it was either the father or the husband deciding, but in a couple of interviews, the participants even expressed facing restrictions imposed by their sons, and even their sisters-in-law. This points to a deeper issue within the cultural norms, about power hierarchies embedded within genders, more specifically, the male gender, not relationships. Here are some examples of sentiments expressed during the interviews:

Res So, you come here when you get annoyed at home?

P1 Yeah, whenever we get annoyed with home, we come here.

Res And you all live together at home? It is easy then to come here together.

P1 Yeah, we all get together. We just come and go.

Res Can you come here alone?

P1 No, no, we cannot come here alone; we don't have permission from our households. We can come here when more of us get together.

And:

Yes, I believe such (women-only) spaces are very important. Women today are different from our generation; they crave independence and safety. They want private, respectful spaces where they feel safe. For me, I wish I had learned how to drive. I have permission to do it now, but unfortunately, I do not think my mind is capable of doing it now. I wish I had, though, so I would be able to go to different places freely.

“Permission,” as a form of social control, is indicative of the norm within the culture of subjugation. While speaking to the women in the parks, most of them also expressed the desire to visit and explore different places, but the desire remained unfulfilled either due to restrictions

from the male household members or an internalized lack of confidence in their ability to navigate public spaces, even when accompanied by the male members of their households. One group shared:

Res If there were no restrictions from male family members, where would you like to go?

P1 We would roam around here and there, explore different places.

P2 Honestly, if there were no restrictions from their side, women wouldn't sit at home for a second.

Res If you women form a group and ask them, will they still not allow you?

P1 They will still refuse. They want us to just be in one place.

Similarly, another interviewee expressed the same notion about permission:

No, no, we haven't gone there. Because these places, like Tatara Park and Bagh-E-Naran, we do not get permission to go there because those parks have men, along with all kinds of people. This park is very secure, there isn't any problem of men here.

Cultural and Religious Framing of Segregation

Women's accounts repeatedly positioned their mobility and access within the frameworks of religion, honor, and propriety that frame gender segregation as not merely practical, but as "right." In these narratives, WOPS were interpreted as religiously and culturally legitimate venues for public presence- a setting where visibility is acceptable and mobility can be defended morally within the context of community and norms. This framing helps explain why, in the bus survey, 90% of respondents reported that their families are more comfortable with

gender-segregated transport, and why, in the parks survey, 50% of the respondents indicated dependence on others for transport; and, for those who depend on someone else, identified that dependence as a principal barrier to access. Hence, where segregation aligns with religious-cultural expectations, it reduces familial constraints and transforms mobility from a risky choice into a morally sanctioned practice.

Women repeatedly linked permission and propriety to religious identity and the idiom of *izzat* (honor). One participant explained the normative boundary by elaborating:

No, I just come here; I do not go anywhere else. My husband does not allow me; he says it is respectful to be here. If women have too much freedom, then obviously that will change them, and it will change society as well. I have older sons, and they have also placed restrictions on the girls. If you are born a Muslim, then you have to follow the Muslim way as well. If you go out and do dishonorable things, then that will obviously create problems.

While discussing segregation and its implications during the Focus Group Discussion, various participants hinted at this exclusion of women as a foreign practice, essentially in an attempt to explore a potential explanation for the difference in the framing of religion and culture:

P2 It is not the religion that is stopping women; it is the culture that is amalgamated with the religion. It is twisted.

P3 It is the perceived religion in our society.

P7 This is more of an Indian culture than a Pakistani or Muslim one. Indians had this thing that women stay at home...

P2 Like not being allowed in temples when they are on their periods...

P7 Yeah, this stuff comes from Indian backgrounds...

P6 That women are impure or unchaste when they are on their periods...

When speaking to the academic expert about these perspectives presented by women at the parks, she alluded to this being a social and systemic problem whereby the patriarchy has been allowed and enabled to maintain its control over women in society. She said:

And for the most part, we conflate it (religion) with culture. Like, you know, things... are part of our culture, good or bad, but we just try to give it a religious claim. So that nobody can come to us asking ‘why?’

This holds true in most circumstances. Using religion to uphold cultural values has been a strategy adopted by many powerful groups, especially religious fundamentalists within Pakistan. Presenting an expectation as a religious mandate rather than a cultural norm closes further debates about the logic and benefits of said expectation, as questioning religious doctrines carries heavy implications. While speaking to this with the NGO and social worker expert, they further reinforced this point:

The patriarchy’s second biggest institution is the mosque. These loudspeakers (at the mosques) that are being used 24/7 (to give religious sermons). The way Mera Jism Meri Marzi (a body autonomy campaign run by Aurat March in 2018) reached Chamkani (a remote village in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa) was through this loudspeaker. So, these patriarchal institutions in our society, coupled with capitalism, do not allow you to breathe.

This conflation of religion and culture often sustains segregation as a moral imperative: parks and buses designated for women are not only safer but proper/right. Consistent with this, bus-survey responses indicating family's comfort in gender-segregated buses and parks survey responses showing a dependence on male family members for transport, remain central to whether a woman can access recreation. Together, these indicators suggest that segregation works as a culturally legible permission structure: it lowers the social costs of women's visibility by embedding movement within acceptable religio-cultural scripts. Thus, cultural and religious narratives do not merely reflect segregation, but they actively produce it as a morally appropriate solution, transforming WOPS into the default pathway through which public life becomes thinkable for many women.

Internalized Norms and Women as Gatekeepers

Another recurring theme in both the interviews and group discussions was the extent to which women themselves participated in the maintenance and reproduction of the very patriarchal norms that limit their mobility and public presence. This was not always achieved through restrictions imposed by men, but often as surveillance and control by other women, including mothers, sisters-in-law, peers, or even strangers in those spaces. Several participants conveyed how restrictions did not come from husbands, but from women within their own families; as one respondent put it:

P2 That *Shinwari* (a Pakhtun tribe) woman is not here because her husband doesn't allow her to visit parks.

P1 No, her husband is actually a nice man. It's her sister-in-law who has imposed

these restrictions on her. Her husband allows her, but he also tells her that there's nothing interesting to see in these parks.

Mothers, too, were repeatedly described as transmitters of honor codes and restrictions, serving as the “appointed gatekeepers” of family reputation. During my discussion with one of the experts, they consistently pointed out the role of women in upholding cycles of subjugation and patriarchy as a means of negotiating within the limited power assigned within familial hierarchical structures. She explained:

To this day, your dad probably has not said, ‘You need to be mindful of my honor/dignity.’ But who taught you this? Your mother. The father appointed them as gatekeepers and removed themselves from the equation. That is why, when something goes wrong, they often say that it is the fault of the mother’s upbringing. If things are good, it is everyone’s effort. If it is bad, it is the mother’s fault.

This reflects holistically what Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) wrote about when talking about patriarchal bargains: women accept subordination in the early stages of their lives, as daughters, sisters, and particularly as daughters-in-law, in anticipation of gaining relatively greater authority when they themselves become mothers-in-law. In patrilocal households, younger women often endure surveillance and restrictions imposed by senior women who capitalize on their limited social power through control of younger female members within the family unit. Scholars working in South Asia have studied and confirmed this dynamic, showing how older women frequently perpetuate restrictions on mobility, honor, and domestic responsibilities as a means of consolidating their hard-won, though derivative and circumscribed, influence within the family hierarchy (Kandiyoti, 1988; Chowdhry, 1994; Jeffery & Jeffery, 1996).

However, recent studies have shown a link between levels of education and the exertion of authority between female household members. Leena Bhattacharya's (2023) analysis of Indian time-use data reveals that when mothers-in-law have acquired at least a secondary education or higher, their daughters-in-law are more likely to participate in paid work and spend less time on household chores. In these households, mothers-in-law, despite being traditional gatekeepers, can also facilitate daughters-in-law's autonomy under certain conditions, especially when educational parity shifts familial bargaining power. Exploring a similar idea of intergenerational strategic negotiation, Habiba & Abbas (2022) describe how mothers-in-law in Pakistan, having endured strict restrictions themselves, may enforce similar limitations later as a form of reclaiming authority, "They experienced the ups and downs in their lives after marriage bearing rough attitudes of her mother-in-law, but now it is their turn to rule over the house and enjoy the happiness of power and control because they spent life in subjugation. Now their daughter-in-law is obliged to obey..." Daughters-in-law often navigate housework, mobility, and autonomy with acute awareness of the expectations set by older women, suggesting that their agency is deeply relational and context-dependent. Across South Asian dynamics, kinship-based hierarchies shape how women's autonomy is negotiated. These examples also resonate with Mernissi's analysis of Moroccan women, who described their mothers and aunts as both protectors and enforcers of seclusion (Mernissi, 1987)

The impact of these internalized norms are not, however, only visible in how older women enforce restrictions, but also in how many women themselves articulate their disempowerment and a lack of confidence in their own perspectives. For example, during one interview at the park, when asked about the changes that needed to be made in order to give women more freedom and mobility, a participant bluntly stated:

No, women should not get freedom; they should stay at home, that's where they look good. If you give Pathans more freedom, they will do everything (negative).

These narratives reflect the deep internalization of patriarchal values, where restrictions on women's mobility are not only normalized but justified as culturally or morally necessary. This loss of confidence in one's own perspective is part of what Bourdieu (2001) described as "symbolic violence," where dominated groups come to perceive structural inequality as legitimate, natural, and inevitable. Another respondent described how even when her husband permitted her to visit women-only parks, her own sense of modesty and fear of dishonor prevented her from exploring beyond:

The men don't say anything to us, but we're shy of them. Personally, we prefer not to visit mixed parks, even with our male family members. They suggested it multiple times, taking us to family parks like DHA Park and Garrison Park, but we still refuse. We don't feel at ease there; there is hesitancy and shyness in our hearts. However, of course, if you have a heart, you definitely want to go to a beautiful place, you feel happy at heart, you walk around, and people make plans. And, you know, we Afridis and Pathans tend to be more conservative and mindful of our honor.

Reiterating a previous quote, another respondent had talked of the "Muslim way," and recalled facing restrictions even from her sons:

No, I just come here, I don't go anywhere else. My husband doesn't allow me, he says it's respectful to be here. If women have too much freedom, then obviously that will change them, and it will change society as well. I have older sons, and they have also placed restrictions on the girls. If you're born a Muslim, then you have to follow the

Muslim way as well. If you go out and do dishonorable things, then that will obviously create problems.

Statements like these are indicative of how normalized patriarchal discourses have become, to the point where women themselves embody them and defend their own subordination as necessary and natural. Here, the “Muslim way” is used as an unquestionable boundary, closing the space for debate or dissent, often a strategy used when religion is used to impose cultural or familial restrictions. Mahmood (2005) and Abu-Lughod (2013) show that practices of piety and modesty, which often look like coercion from a Western perspective, can also be understood by women themselves as a way of exercising moral agency. However, in contexts like Peshawar, this same framing often works differently: it ties women’s sense of self-worth to obedience, using religion to legitimize their subordination and weakening their confidence in their own perspectives, especially in cases where religious knowledge is gatekept by men.

Men often act as powerful gatekeepers of religious discourse, tending to monopolize and overtake interpretive authority in ways that delegitimize women’s voices. Zia (2009) and Toor (2012) both showcase how religious narratives in Pakistan have historically been used to police women’s mobility and voice, often through male clerical authority, while sidelining women’s lived experiences. In such an environment, women who internalize these narratives may feel unable to show dissent or raise questions even when they perceive injustice, reinforcing a cycle of silence and compliance.

However, in line with Mahmood’s (2008) work with the Egyptian piety movement, women’s experiences are not entirely riddled with internalized disempowerment. Some also described finding confidence and community through religious spaces that are typically

associated with patriarchal control. During my interview with the academic expert, she recounted her encounters with a group of young girls in a village madrasa, where they studied *hifz* (memorization of the Quran), Quran translation, and *tafseer* (interpretation of religious text). While these gatherings were apparently religious, the expert expressed how they also functioned as socially acceptable spaces of leisure and solidarity:

Yes, they were learning the Quran and all, but actually, it was more of an escape from everyday chores, because it was a very acceptable escape, even for the family. Now, they could not stop them; it was a very legitimate outing, and nobody would object to that. And, I thought, this is where their agency was coming in for me. And it was, in fact, the Madrasa teachings which was empowering them. For them, it was empowering them on a religious level as well, and which in turn was giving them agency and an upper hand, perhaps over their menfolk also, who had not been to Madrasas, because according to them, now they knew better than the men, because the men did not have those lessons.

For these girls, attending madrasa provided not only a break from domestic responsibilities but also a source of religious knowledge that subtly shifted gendered power relations within the household. While male clerics and family members oftentimes use religious knowledge as authority to legitimize restrictions on women, women who develop their own expertise are sometimes in a better position to resist or contest these claims. Mahmood's (2005) work speaks exactly of this, about how religious learning can be both a site for social control and a resource for agency, enabling women to reinterpret and negotiate patriarchal expectations from within the language of piety and modesty itself.

This process of socialization and resocialization of women's roles and power demonstrates how they operate in constrained social structures where authority must be earned by internalizing patriarchal norms, hence making it difficult to break the cycle.

The same logic is observed within women-only parks as well, where women reported facing moral policing from other women, often in the name of religion. Several focus group participants discussed in detail incidents within women-only parks where they were approached by other women within the park premises to cover up properly or not to run/exercise. One FGD participant even reported being on the receiving end of this religious policy as young as 6 years old. Another participant expressed:

Even if you don't have men to judge you there (within the parks), women will come up to you and say, 'Hide your hair/head.' So, I feel like that harassment doesn't just end with men; it also happens from women.

Another participant elaborated that while she wanted to exercise in gear, she could not, because the "religious police" inside the park would reprimand her:

You cannot go in, like, in a tracksuit or some gear to exercise with dumbbells and stuff. You can use it, but it would have to be in *Shalwar Kamiz* (traditional Pakistani clothing), because the religious police would come and tell you not to dress up like that. Going there in your gear is not possible; you have to wear a burqa and abaya, but at least inside, let us live. But they won't, they will tell you what to do.

The idea of women acting as "custodians of patriarchy" has been documented across various contexts. As Kandiyoti observed, "women strategize within a set of concrete constraints," and

one such strategy is women's compliance with gendered restrictions, which is often done for survival and respectability in restrictive systems. Moreover, Abu-Lughod (2013) also analyzed similar social behavior in Afghanistan, highlighting how women reproduce ideals of modesty through everyday practices such as veiling, presenting these as personal virtues even when they constrain mobility.

Participants themselves acknowledged this cycle of reproduction, noting how generations of women are conditioned into such roles:

P1 And, you are saying this (that women should have more freedom), so, in their eyes, you must also be a very modern and liberal type. They must have said it in a very judgmental way... They are fed this (narrative) most of their life, so they think it is wrong. They think that what happened to us is okay. And if someone speaks against it, then it is an abnormal thing.

P2 That's how they are conditioned.

P4 Yes. Conditioning. If such a place is made for women here (more women-only spaces), as long as we do not change the thinking of women, we will not join that way.

P2 That's what I say. That's what I tell people as well. When they organize sessions in universities about empowerment and education, I advise them not to share the information with us, but rather to inform our parents. Tell our elders so that they understand. We know these things. We are going through these things. We know this phase. We can explain it to them. But when something is explained through a (proper, external) source, they truly understand it.

In line with the idea of intergenerational transmission of patriarchy, the responsibility of socialization into the honor/shame system often falls on women. Hence, the family unit, and women specifically, end up functioning as the site where norms around mobility, modesty, segregation, etc., are both resisted and reproduced. Resultingly, as an extension, WOPS are then not only sites of freedom, but also sites of discipline, where wider gender norms are enforced, contested, and negotiated. Women are simultaneously beneficiaries of these spaces and custodians of the very structures that limit them.

Class and Structural Barriers

Although Peshawar's women's access to public life is governed by patriarchal norms, class differences, and other systemic injustices severely limit who can exercise mobility and who remains confined. Women's experiences in the parks and on buses demonstrated how "freedom" is negotiated when gendered expectations and material limitations like poverty, education, and professional standing collide. When discussing their dependence on husbands or sons for mobility and the near impossibility of pursuing education or a job due to financial demands, women from lower- and middle-income families frequently described themselves as "helpless" and "like prisoners." As two women in a park group explained:

P1 Nothing is ever in a woman's hands, especially poor women like us who are helpless and reliant on their husbands.

P2 Some women are strong; they go out and do things for themselves and have jobs. But we are both uneducated, we're almost like prisoners.

This language of “imprisonment” highlights the multiple levels of structural barriers that the women are having to navigate, which are not only financial but also encompass a lack of educational access and the absence of enabling infrastructure for women’s participation in public life. Reiterating the survey results, in the Parks Usage Survey, more than half of the respondents reported depending on someone else bringing them to the parks; among those, the majority identified this dependence as the main factor limiting their access. This shows that structural barriers are not simply about gendered restrictions but about the compounding effects of economic dependence and logistical disparities like practical inequalities in transport, proximity, time, and infrastructure, which combine with financial dependence and gender norms to create uneven access (Braun, 2005). Similar to this, most respondents to the Bus Usage Survey said they would travel less if gender-segregated buses ceased to exist, illustrating the intersection of class and cultural norms: women without access to private vehicles depend on these services, but their dependence is based on the guarantee of segregation. On the other hand, access to private vehicles or drivers frequently allows women from affluent households to get beyond these structural restrictions. The academic expert added to this disparity:

Yes. Women’s accessibility to public spaces, for example, if they have their own car or a driver, they can go anywhere they want. On the other hand, a woman belonging to a middle- or lower-income family will have to think about how to get access. So, this is a huge difference.

This comparison demonstrates how the effects of patriarchal constraints are mitigated by class privilege. Even if patriarchal rules still apply to all women, women who have access to money perceive these limitations differently, frequently having greater "choice" or flexibility.

It's not really, you know, men versus women, even in Pakistan. It's more about your social class... A woman who has to use public transport faces a whole different set of issues. But if I go by my private car, chauffeur-driven too, the kind of problems she faces, I may not face at all.

For a long time, feminist scholars have stressed that structural injustices like caste, class, and race exacerbate gender oppression, which does not occur in a vacuum. The idea of intersectionality, first proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991, demonstrates how different overlapping systems of disadvantage produce experiences of exclusion. Rich women frequently use private vehicles, household work, or financial means to get beyond patriarchal prohibitions that bind poorer women in South Asia, as Liddle and Joshi (1986) and Raza (2018) have similarly shown. Furthermore, according to Naila Kabeer (1999), empowerment necessitates access to resources (money, education, and infrastructure) just as much as agency and accomplishments. Cultural change alone cannot eliminate systemic exclusion without redistributive structural measures, such as public transportation, cheap education, and safety nets.

Economic uncertainties further exacerbate these limitations. During interviews at the parks, various respondents raised issues relating to inflation, school fees, rent, and food insecurity as barriers not only to leisure but also to education and employment. One participant remarked:

P1 Restrictions aren't the only barrier holding women back. Inflation is a major issue, too. When we can barely afford rent, they just made electricity even more expensive. We have homes, we use appliances, we have kids, and it all requires electricity.

P2 We will find a way to afford the fare to visit the park; it's our own personal luxury moment, but the government should focus on reducing the overall inflation rate so we can all relax a little bit.

Another participant explained that while her family supported girls' education in principle, high fees and associated costs restricted access:

We do have permission; our family is happy at the prospect of education. But many schools have really high fees. My own brothers and sisters go to Iqra School. There are times we can manage the fee, and other times we cannot... But the problem with fees exists in certain special schools.

It's telling how permission and affordability are layered here. Participation is still impacted by structural barriers like school fees or transportation costs, even in cases where patriarchal consent is present. These narratives support the claim that structural redistribution and infrastructure investment are necessary for achieving gender justice, which cannot be attained just through cultural change (Kabeer, 1999; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

In other cases, participants connected these exclusions directly to their lack of education and skills, pointing out that training itself requires money and mobility:

P2 Sometimes women work from home and make things by hand...

P1 Yeah, but that also requires money. If you want to, you will have to go to a center and develop that skill through training; it does take time and money. The main problem is money.

The circularity of structural barriers is demonstrated by these testimonies: women must have mobility, income, and education to overcome exclusion, but their exclusion prevents them from accessing those resources to begin with. Women's access to WOPS remains disproportionate in the absence of institutional support, whether in the form of more robust safety nets, accessible public education, or affordable transportation.

When considered collectively, the data indicates that structural and socioeconomic restrictions make patriarchal control more pronounced by guaranteeing that poor women, in particular, continue to face double constraints. Wealthy women may use private means to get over constraints, but most women are still constrained by poverty and disparities in opportunities, in addition to cultural norms. Therefore, it is impossible to understand WOPS in a vacuum; their meaning and accessibility are profoundly class-based, determining which women can utilize them as places of empowerment and which are left out.

Institutional and Policy-Level Gatekeeping

While WOPS, such as parks and buses, demonstrate immediate gains in mobility, the persistence of institutional gatekeeping reflects how patriarchal structures adapt to maintain their control. Participants and experts repeatedly highlighted how even when reforms or “women-friendly” initiatives are introduced, they are often diluted, manipulated, or tokenized at the policy level to preserve patriarchal authority. One expert described this dynamic when discussing reserved seats in Pakistan’s legislatures:

The initiatives that take place in Pakistan, be it women-friendly legislature or reserved seats, they look very good superficially and you get international recognition for it as well, but if you take an in-depth look at them, you’ll see that they are trying their best to

make sure that these initiatives or policies do not touch their patriarchal norms... We suggested that women should contest for these seats, but what they did was hand over the power to the party head. If the head likes Mahnoor, he'll give her a ticket. If he likes Saima, he'll give her a ticket. Because of this, women obviously cannot go against their party lines... They'll pretend to make both parties happy, but in reality, they are only making themselves happy.

Even when women are permitted to participate in public life, this permission often serves as a form of tokenism, where isolated facilities or services are introduced as symbolic gestures without addressing deeper systemic inequities. As a participant put it:

From these past three terms, you can see that women politicians exist in the KP Assembly, but for the past two tenures, there have been no women ministers. This patriarchal mindset does not allow for it. Sit with these MPAs someday and have a candid conversation with them, and they'll tell you how much they have to fight for themselves within and against the system. So, yes, we have the concept of women-only spaces, but the fights these women must endure are an entirely different story. You would think that perhaps this is a more resilient woman; that's why she progressed, but she will almost always be fighting against the mindset, no matter where she is. Like, none of the standing committee chairs were women; aren't they all MPAs? They can only speak when their party head wants them to. You know what they call these reserved seats in the assembly? They call them *khairati* (token/handout) seats. They say, "You should stop talking, you're here on a token/handout seat anyway." So, I really understand their frustrations.

A parallel pattern was echoed in expert accounts of women holding high-ranking bureaucratic positions but still deferring to male supervisors:

She is the head of the department, but when I ask her for data, she tells me to write a letter to her male supervisor. If it were her male counterpart, he would have provided it in half an hour. This is how even women in positions of power are undermined.

These examples indicate how tokenism in formal institutions reflects the conditional freedom of women-only parks and buses: access exists, but it is mediated by male authority. Women can only participate in both areas under strictly regulated conditions. Many women in the parks survey valued designated women's spaces; they simultaneously expressed that accessing other public spaces remained restricted. Just as women in politics are allowed representation only through party-controlled modalities, women in parks and buses are allowed visibility only through segregation.

The expert further elaborated on how the legal reforms around violence against women further demonstrate this double-edged dynamic. As she recounted, the 2015 amendments to the honor killing law, which were campaigned for by their organization, appeared to strengthen protections by making such crimes "non-compoundable." However, during the adoption of the bill in the legislative assembly, they simultaneously left discretion to the judges to decide whether cases fell under *fasad fil arz* (mischief on earth): a condition that, in practice, allowed patriarchal norms to continue shielding perpetrators.

Now, in a society with a patriarchal mindset, who do you think will be the judge? When a man commits an honor killing and he is taken to the station under police custody, he is a hero for them. So, how will the judge be able to claim that it is Fasad Fil Arz?

In South Asia, where governments enact laws that apparently empower women while maintaining the underlying patriarchal structures, these narratives align with feminist criticisms of "state feminism" (Kandiyoti, 2007; Rai, 2017). In the absence of accountability systems, "affirmative" measures run the risk of being superficial tactics that uphold official legitimacy without bringing about legitimate structural change. In this way, gatekeeping at the institutional and policy levels functions as the macro-level mirror of the micro-level processes described in this chapter. Protective laws, reserved seats, and WOPS all act as conditional allowances that provide women with restricted access while reiterating male control over the conditions of participation. Reforms that do not confront structural power, as Fraser (2009) contends, frequently function as "affirmative remedies," alleviating the symptoms of inequality without changing its underlying causes.

Critiques, Limitations, and Structural Challenges

While women-only parks act as essential enablers for enhancing women's mobility and visibility in Peshawar, they also expose the contradictions of segregation as a strategy for empowerment. Focus group discussions, interviews, survey data, and expert interviews reveal how these spaces, though celebrated as safe havens, can be fragile and are unevenly resourced, often reproducing the very exclusions they seek to resist. Practical barriers such as overcrowding, restrictive timings, male staff presence, and policy neglect align with deeper structural critiques, including the absence of institutional support and the risk of establishing gender segregation as a long-term "solution."

This section examines these critiques on two levels: first, the everyday limitations that impact women's experiences within parks themselves; and second, the broader structural

challenges that question the sustainability and transformative potential of WOPS in the absence of wider societal change.

Practical Limitations of Women-Only Parks

While women-only parks offer a rare opportunity for women to move, socialize, and exercise without constant male surveillance, their practical limitations hinder profound developmental opportunities, revealing the fragility of these spaces as long-term solutions. Instead of offering unconditional empowerment, these parks then often end up reproducing constraints within themselves in the form of staffing, accessibility, overcrowding, and policy-level neglect that also trickles down to their maintenance.

Interviews and focus groups revealed that many women and their families remain deeply skeptical of the safety and seclusion these spaces apparently promise. As one participant relayed, her aunt questioned:

What's the use of a women-only park when all the men staff who work there come at the same time as women... the janitorial staff, or the gardeners, or the sweepers... just looking around at who's here, what's anyone doing. So, she feels like it's not comfortable enough for us.

This presence of male staff, like gardeners, security personnel, etc., undermines the very idea of privacy and safety that makes these spaces attractive in the first place. For some, this contradiction also raised bigger questions:

When will men learn to behave in front of women exactly? ... If we don't mix them up, how will men behave?... But then, when we're looking at it in the longer term, how does

that reflect on more serious matters if we cannot allow women or if we do not allow women just to sort of mix in those spaces which are predominantly occupied by men, do you think we will develop a mindset to let them sign on bigger issues? Let's say national issues, provincial issues, right? You see, I mean, do you get my point what I'm trying to say? If we don't have a mindset to let them roam around freely in bazaars, do you think we'll ever have a mindset to accept their judgments?

The tension here reveals the double-edged nature of segregation: it offers immediate relief but risks reinforcing men's exclusionary entitlement over the public sphere in the long run. This framing also highlights the lack of accountability for men's behavior, which is the underlying factor that keeps women secluded in their homes. The dominant, recurring societal or cultural response is to regulate women's mobility rather than disciplining men's conduct, resulting in the normalization of women's exclusion as an acceptable, safe solution (Phadke et al., 2011)

Practical limitations were not limited to surveillance by male workers. Restricted timings of facilities such as gyms and parks were also raised as significant barriers. Women described how gym slots for them were scheduled during working hours, as if women did not have jobs, while prime evening hours were reserved for men. One focus group participant explained:

Apparently, according to them, the safer time for women is in the morning, and it is not safe in the evening... I told the gym instructor that I do have a job and can't access the gym in the morning, but he said these timings are already decided, and you have to come at this time, we cannot facilitate you.

Such policies indicate how urban design and institutional policies reproduce patriarchal assumptions about women's availability and needs, further restricting their accessibility and

mobility. These could be a result of a lack of representation of women in decision-making spaces, or unconscious bias towards prioritizing men over women in times of resource constriction, e.g., having one gym and needing to accommodate both men and women.

During my observations at Khyber Park, these limitations were observed again. At Khyber Park, women were indeed present in groups, walking, talking, and socializing more freely than in mixed spaces, yet their comfort was still limited. Most women remained veiled, some even switching from their outdoor white *chador* to a dupatta, suggesting they felt only partially able to relax dress codes. Economic exclusions also surfaced within this dynamic. While men dominated food vending outside of the park, women were prohibited from running stalls inside. Some attempted to mediate this by “sneaking in” weighing scales or *mehndi* (henna) cones to sell small services, a covert act of resistance but also a reminder of the structural barriers to women’s economic participation in public spaces. One participant elaborated on this:

According to the staff of this park (the gardeners), government authorities have banned all forms of selling within the park. Even women who bring homemade items to sell are also turned away. They say that if the authorities find out, they’ll stop their salaries.

It is unclear why a policy like this exists; however, there is a significant potential for these places to offer avenues for economic empowerment of women running small businesses, especially food, jewelry, etc. While bringing up this observation during the focus group discussions, several participants expressed the potential of these spaces to accommodate micro-businesses:

P4 But I want to focus on this one point that I really liked about these parks, which are these micro-businesses. The women who are not allowed to work go there and trade

and sell off their stuff and buy things. That's what I really liked about it. Without even letting their husbands know, it is for their sense of independence, their own little secret.

P7 Earn a little fucking money so they can spend it without begging their husbands for money.

P4 Yeah, it helps them feel empowered, that "yeah, I have my own money."

Res So, in a sense, these parks have the potential to act as marketplaces?

P4 Even tutoring.

At Shahi Bagh, the shutting down of the women-only section, called Pardah Bagh, altogether illustrated the fragility of such spaces. Even though Pardah Bagh was a historic park made for only women to access for decades, authorities recently transformed it into a "family section," where men could enter but only with women, reducing the autonomy and private space women had carved out in a condensed part of the city. Conversations with the local superintendent highlighted how issues of violence among men in the park, sometimes even armed, were used as justifications by families to further restrict women's mobility: rather than disciplining men, the outcome was that "the immediate response isn't to condemn men, but to keep women at home." This, unfortunately, is a common social occurrence and has been captured effectively by Phadke, Ranade, and Khan, who explain how women's exclusion is continuously framed as the safest solution to societal problems, even if it compromises their right to public life (Phadke et al., 2011).

Survey data also raised similar concerns, showing how women themselves identified overcrowding, inadequate facilities, and staffing issues as persistent barriers. In an open-ended survey question, one respondent wrote, "because there aren't many women-only parks, the one I visit is extremely crowded and suffocating," while another insisted, "security staff should also be

women, not men.” Cleanliness, lighting, and the absence of washrooms were mentioned repeatedly. Mothers noted the lack of child-friendly spaces, limiting their ability to use the parks comfortably. Still, respondents also stressed the unique freedoms these parks offered: “The freedom to exist in a public space without the ogling eyes of men” and “a healthy environment that promotes mental and physical health.” These voices highlight both the everyday empowerment enabled by WOPS and the frustrations created by their insufficiencies.

Structural Critiques

While women-only parks and similar initiatives are often described and celebrated as “safe havens,” continued overreliance on them reflects deeper structural failings in urban governance and gender relations. Interviews with experts describe how these spaces, though valuable for offering women short-term support, also risk reinforcing long-term exclusion. As one expert noted:

Yes, women do feel empowered, maybe at a personal level, because at least they can go and see the outside world. But is that what is going to work in the long term? No. After all, how are the men going to learn to live with women and respect women if they are not their mothers, daughters, or sisters?

This highlights an important dichotomy, a “Catch 22” situation, as the expert described: while segregation validates women’s immediate mobility, it simultaneously delays the sociocultural transformation required for broader gender equality. Participant observations at Pardah Bagh captured this dynamic effectively. The closure of the women-only section, called Pardah Bagh, inside a bigger mixed park called Shahi Bagh, and its conversion into a “family park” revealed both the fragility of women’s designated spaces and the fragility of institutional commitment to

gender equity. Women, once offered a separate, private space, were instead pushed back into mixed settings where the male gaze was unavoidable. As I noted during my visit to the park, women largely sat at the outskirts of the park, veiled and immobile, while young and older men dominated the center through sports and movement. This revealed how women's access, even within "family sections," remained contingent upon invisibility and withdrawal. In contrast, Khyber Park showed the partial possibilities of segregation. While most women continued to wear veils, they engaged more openly in conversations, picnics, and walking.

Experts further emphasized the infrastructural limitations of segregation as a sustainable model. "How many spaces are we going to create, or how many can we afford to create?" one expert asked, pointing to the urban density and limited municipal resources of Peshawar. Survey data also showed this frustration amongst women, with multiple respondents demanding more women-only parks, while simultaneously criticizing their small sizes, overcrowding, and lack of amenities: "Because there aren't many women-only parks, the one I visit is extremely crowded and suffocating"; "Women-only parks are usually unfunded and smaller." These complaints highlight the uneven quality of provision, where women's spaces are systematically under-resourced compared to mixed parks such as Bagh-e-Naran. Beyond resources, an expert critiqued the lack of support mechanisms accompanying such spaces. She spoke about the hollowness of gender-sensitive legislature in the absence of systemic reinforcement:

All this legislature on one side, but it all exists without a support mechanism. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has a domestic violence act, but to file a complaint about it, you'll need to go to the station. Even from my house, if you have to go to the Tatara Police Station, the taxi will take Rs 150, and not every woman has Rs 150. Without any kind of support system, these women-friendly legislature or women-only spaces, these initiatives flop. If

there is violence committed against a woman, the police are the first point of reference, but the police have no women. The single woman inside the police station is as insecure there as any random house in the neighborhood. There is a 10% quota for women in the police, but women do not come for those positions. So, this lack of a support system is also one of the reasons why people have so many issues; that's also what's affecting the system at large.

The same holds true for parks: without broader institutional support, such as affordable transport, female staff, and recognition of women's right to space, women-only parks become tokenistic measures rather than transformative ones.

At the same time, other interviews have presented contrasting perspectives, pointing to the importance of "quotidian agency." While Mahmood (2005) and Abu-Lughod (2013) have argued that women's modesty practices can be forms of moral agency, experts here reframed parks as sites of everyday, embodied empowerment. One expert described how even restrictive spaces could be empowering in the short-term: "You do have quotidian agency and that is what the women do enjoy (within these parks). But is that enough?" This question represents how women-only parks operate in the liminal space between immediate relief and structural stagnation. They provide quotidian agency but not structural empowerment; they enable temporary relaxation but do little to address patriarchal power dynamics in streets, markets, and institutions. Without simultaneous efforts to transform behaviors and attitudes in the larger society, policing practices, and urban design, segregation risks being an unconstructive and narrowly circumscribed practice.

This paradox is central to the design of WOPS. On one hand, they represent vital entry points to public life, allowing women to navigate restrictive cultural and familial boundaries and access education, work, or recreation. On the other hand, their “only resort” nature indicates the systemic failure of mainstream urban planning and governance to provide inclusive environments. Following Kaufmann’s (2004) framework of motility, these spaces temporarily enhance women’s mobility capital by granting them the capacity to move, but do so within restrictive parameters that simultaneously reinforce patriarchal control. The reliance on such segregated facilities, therefore, reveals both empowerment and exclusion: empowerment in the sense of enabling women to be visible in public life, and exclusion because their participation remains conditional on segregation.

Chapter 6: Way Forward

On the one hand, women-only parks give women forms of everyday agency that might not otherwise be available to them by offering safety, leisure, and a break from the restrictions and surveillance of mixed-gender environments. The notion that women's visibility must remain conditional, however, is further supported by the fact that their very presence acts as evidence to the structural exclusions that still influence women's access to the public sphere. Taken together, these perspectives reflect a spectrum of advocacy: from short-term interventions that make women-only public spaces (WOPS) more functional and inclusive, to medium-term strategies that build collective capacity, to long-term aspirations for a society where women's safety and visibility are not contingent upon segregation. This section highlights these various suggestions, centering the voices of women themselves alongside expert perspectives, in order to map out a multi-layered pathway toward greater empowerment and inclusion.

To situate these tensions conceptually and theoretically, it is helpful to reconsider the moral arguments that often underlie women-focused interventions. The inconsistency surrounding WOPS resonates with what Bornstein (2012) calls the “disquieting gifts” of humanitarianism: actions framed as protection or benevolence can alleviate harm while simultaneously reproducing asymmetries and hierarchies of power and obligation. In her study of New Delhi, Bornstein illustrates how charitable and development efforts are shaped by a complex relationship between care and control, where the recipient's ability to receive assistance is influenced by the moral authority of the provider. Framed similarly, WOPS risk being viewed as a gift, such as protection, respectability, or moral guardianship, rather than as an entitlement and right of urban citizenship. WOPS can empower through safety and sociability, yet keep

women's presence contingent on patriarchal narratives that regulate visibility and mobility and essentialize women's roles. Recognizing this, as an additional framework, helps clarify why these spaces feel both enabling and constraining, and why framing them as rights, not favors, matters for durable empowerment and pragmatic development (Bornstein, 2012).

Everyday Agency, Education, and Collective Strengthening

The understanding that significant change must start at the level of everyday agency is one of the most recurring themes in the interviews and conversations. Although women-only parks offer a brief break from restrictive norms, both participants and experts emphasized that agency is developed by collective strength, education, and solidarity rather than simply granted from above. Several women pointed to the central role of family-level resistance in opening up avenues. One participant narrated:

In my family, my mom was the rebel... her elder sister was just allowed to study till matric, and then my mom fought for her, and then her sister completed FSc. and higher education. Then she got married, and she wanted to do a job, but my grandfather never allowed her. When he was abroad, she used to work because she was a rebel and fought for herself and my grandmother. Then she told my father she wants to do a job and then completed her masters and got a job. Now she is a government teacher and is pursuing what she wanted. But there were limitations; she had to be a rebel.

This narrative demonstrates how, in conservative settings, empowerment frequently depends on contestation and negotiation within the household, similar to what Kandiyoti (1988) talks about as "patriarchal bargains." Younger participants similarly pointed to the persistence of permission-seeking, even within families they considered "progressive." One explained:

My brother recently got engaged. And there was just one thing from the girl's side that we had to let her study after marriage. And I hated this thing too much. My family is a very progressive family; they don't restrict or anything, but the thing that even in 2024 we still need permission... these things still happen.

These reflections show how deeply rooted patriarchal control is, where women's access to education or freedom of movement is often seen as dependent on approval and can be taken away. However, they also highlight the possibility for women to gradually challenge this control through everyday claims to their rights, which can take the form of requests or negotiations, thereby undermining the traditional authority of men over these aspects of life.

Across various interviews, education was identified as a fundamental driver of empowerment. As one park interviewee summarized:

Education is good for everyone. It is good for men, too, but for women, it is very important. One, women cannot do anything for themselves when they are uneducated. If they get educated, at least she can make a way for herself... Women cannot do anything without education. For her, education is everything, she needs it.

Here, education is presented as a necessity for agency and survival in situations where women would otherwise be dependent on male family members, rather than only for self-improvement. Sen's (1990, 1995) capabilities approach, which views empowerment as a process and a result of increasing people's substantive freedoms, is in line with this idea.

Yet education alone was seen as insufficient without collective solidarity among women. One expert emphasized that empowerment requires dismantling the narrative that “a woman is another woman’s enemy”:

The first step we believe is the development of women’s agency, which is the most important; women need to be united. That is how they will be empowered. Without that, dividing them is very easy... Men always say, ‘a woman is another woman’s enemy.’ Like, at home, the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law are fighting. These same mother-in-law and daughter-in-law need to act as each other’s support.

This call for mutual support highlights a larger criticism of how patriarchal systems create competition among women, strengthening cycles of surveillance and control within families. Thus, building solidarity is an act of resistance that challenges both the material and symbolic systems of oppression.

Information-sharing was also positioned as critical to strengthening women’s everyday agency. One expert explained:

Before that, women need to be informed about all these support systems and legislation. See, the law is not something that is going to come to your house and ask you to utilize it. If you know about it, you will be able to tell someone else as well. Our organization’s logo is, ‘Information is Power.’ Use it. Share it.’ So, this information needs to reach women.

Cornwall (2016) contends that empowerment should be viewed in a relational manner: as something developed within and through social relationships, rather than merely held by

individuals. Hence, knowledge, in this context, serves not only as a shield but also as a catalyst for women to amplify their empowerment by fostering networks of mutual support.

Finally, both experts highlighted the importance of working with youth as a long-term strategy for change. Youth were described as “moldable,” open to new norms, and capable of reshaping public life if engaged consistently. However, this work requires resources and sustained investment:

If you want to bring serious change, you should work with the youth. People like me will not change, but if you work with the youth, both boys and girls, you will see the change... The population of youth is more than 40% in Pakistan; working with them is largely beneficial, but working with them also requires a lot of resources, because understanding them and talking to them, reaching out to them, exploring avenues to communicate with them, all require resources.

The strengthening of everyday agency should be viewed as a continuous process that includes individual acts of resistance within households, collective solidarity among women, and the development of new mindsets across generations. Women-only parks contribute to this continuum by providing safe spaces for relaxation and the building of solidarity, where conversation, support, and informal learning can take place. However, as noted by participants and experts, without structural support through education, access to information, and engagement of young people, this sense of agency may remain brief and fragmented.

Expanding Safe Infrastructures and Local Accessibility

WOPS like parks were widely appreciated for offering numerous benefits to their users; participants repeatedly emphasized that their utility and impact are negatively impacted by weak infrastructure, limited accessibility, and inconsistent institutional commitment, disallowing them from delivering their full potential. For many, the issue was not simply the presence of such spaces but the absence of adequate facilities and the uneven distribution across the city.

Requests for basic amenities were common. As one woman explained, a small canteen or food stall could significantly enhance the experience of visiting a park:

Oh, if they make a canteen, that would be the best thing. Like, a small hotel for food. You see, when you come here, it is hard for us to go out to the nearby market because they (men) do not like it when they see you walking outside. So, something here or nearby would make it easier.

Another interviewee noted the dangers of having to rely on roadside vendors: “When our kids buy food from the cart outside the park by the roadside, we worry about their safety, especially with cars passing by. We need one inside the park.”

While framed as places for women’s convenience and independence, lapses in design and management of these spaces, like the lack of food stalls, toilets, shaded seating areas, etc., intersect with issues of safety and autonomy, continuing women’s dependence on men and external vendors.

At the same time, affordability was a key concern. Participants recalled a canteen that once existed at Khyber Park but failed because of high prices, “There used to be one here, in the

canteen by the entrance, but it was very expensive. They would sell one samosa for Rs 50, but no one would buy it, so they closed it.”

Discussions with the focus group highlighted issues associated with transportation, which can create significant barriers for mobility, especially for low-income families who do not have immediate access to parks like these and have to travel from farther away. One FGD participant recalled her observation:

If anyone from the city side wants to go to Khyber Park, they will have to plan it at least one week before, calculate the expenses, and so on. And I am talking about low-income people here. If it is high-income women, they don't have to worry about that.

This observatory hints at a broader structural inequality: WOPS remain unevenly and scarcely distributed across cities, catering disproportionately to middle- and upper-class families. For working-class women, distance and cost made regular access difficult and inconvenient, reinforcing the notion that these spaces are a privilege rather than a right. The closure of Pardah Bagh further deepened participants' mistrust in institutional commitment. One focus group participant expressed, “There should be women-only spaces in every locality at least. So, everyone can access it. Why would they shut down Pardah Bagh?”

For numerous participants, the expansion of this infrastructure was not merely about introducing new amenities but also about guaranteeing local accessibility. The demand for "at least one women-only space in every locality" showcases the desire for and importance of spatial justice. In the absence of such spaces, women from conservative families or lower-income backgrounds find themselves marginalized, as traveling far to reach parks is often unfeasible and socially unacceptable.

My own participant observation at Shahi Bagh reinforced this concern. When Pardah Bagh was merged into a “family section,” officials justified the move as pragmatic, without concerning themselves with the perspectives of women who accessed that space. As one superintendent at the park acknowledged to me, mixed spaces can run the risk of “compromising a woman’s pardah and respect” due to incidences of violence erupting between men at the parks, and that the absence of dedicated women’s spaces risks pushing women back into confinement, since “the immediate response isn’t to condemn men, but to keep women at home.”

Participants also drew parallels with men’s spaces, pointing out the gendered imbalance in accessibility and leisure infrastructure. One focus group participant argued:

Men have every kind of liberty in our society, but still, there are men-specific places where they go and sit... But if men, after even having the freedom to go anywhere, have their places, then why not women? We do not even have freedom, so at least we should have these kinds of public places.

This critique of the disparity between accessibility shows how women-only parks are not merely “safe havens” but are also symbolic demands for parity, equity, if not equality; if men’s informal hujras, tea stalls, and public squares are normalized, women’s spaces should be similarly legitimized and developed.

Participants emphasized that improving infrastructure is crucial for turning temporary relief into sustainable empowerment. By adding canteens, seating areas, playgrounds, and affordable facilities, women would be able to stay longer, socialize more freely, and reduce their reliance on men. Additionally, ensuring that these spaces are distributed equitably across neighborhoods would promote inclusion across different social classes.

Yet, as both women and experts cautioned, such measures are only meaningful if supported by institutional commitment and targeted policies. Without consistent investment and policy backing, closures like Pardah Bagh and overpriced or inaccessible facilities risk undermining WOPS altogether. This reveals the contradiction: WOPS can serve as gateways to empowerment, but without infrastructure, accessibility, and institutional support, they remain fragile, contested, and exclusionary.

Normalizing Women's Presence in Wider Public Life

While women-only parks and segregated spaces provide immediate relief and everyday agency, many participants and experts stressed that such spaces are not sufficient for long-term transformation. They may offer comfort and safety, but they risk reinforcing the notion that women's presence in broader society must remain conditional or exceptional. As one expert explained, the issue is not just about having parks or segregated areas, but about reshaping societal norms so that women are accepted as rightful participants in public life:

Yes, women do get that freedom because not everybody can enjoy the pleasure of a garden or a park. But in the long term, when are we really going to give women that agency to roam around freely as men do? If we cannot allow women to mix in spaces predominantly occupied by men, do you think we will ever have a mindset to accept their judgments on bigger issues?

Several participants argued that visibility and normalization are essential. Women described how behaviors that once seemed inappropriate, such as women driving or eating at restaurants, eventually became normalized simply because women persisted in occupying those spaces. As one expert reflected:

The more spaces women use, the more they will know that women can exist in these spaces. See, this problem does not exist in your university's canteen, does it? Why? Because they have gotten used to it. Both men and women frequently go there. So, we need to make a conscious effort to develop this habit in them (men), and they start to accept women's existence in public spaces, just like how they started accepting women drivers.

Another woman emphasized the need to move beyond the comfort of enclaves:

If we keep feeling confident only in women-only places, that is not how the world works. Yes, you feel safe there, but that is your comfort space... and to grow, you need to get out of your comfort zone.

Examples of grassroots resistance emerged from participants who deliberately reclaimed masculine-coded spaces like markets, plazas, and *dhaabas* (roadside tea stalls). One recalled:

We had a group called feminist Friday. We initiated an internal campaign titled 'Claim Your Space.' One day, we went and drank tea at a *dhaaba* (truck-stop shop). We did not mind it, but the *dhaaba* owner had a problem with it. Claiming and reclaiming these spaces is itself a challenge. And this is not as big a challenge for us as it is for them (men).

Similar actions have been observed in various global "right to the city" movements. Such actions, while symbolic, highlight the importance of women's visible presence in contested spaces. Participants also pointed to the youth as critical agents of change. Experts emphasized that transforming gendered norms requires investing in younger generations:

If you want to bring serious change, you should work with the youth. People like me will not change, but if you work with the youth, both boys and girls, you will see the change, and it will also be sustainable... Their minds are moldable; you can get them on your side more easily.

Integrating gender equality into education and curriculum was also seen as necessary:

This support mechanism has to be your syllabus. It needs to establish the narrative that men and women are equal... Until and unless they teach this stuff in the syllabus, all these initiatives are not going to be beneficial.

Ultimately, the way forward is not to simply create and multiply more WOPS indefinitely, but to normalize women's right to exist everywhere. As one participant powerfully put it:

Women should feel safe everywhere. They should be able to go to any public place without feeling scared or uncomfortable. But because of men, this is not possible... The government needs to take some steps. It should encourage women to go out and condition men to act decently.

A multi-layered vision for empowerment is revealed by the suggestions made by experts and participants. In order to make current parks more welcoming and sustainable, women demanded immediate improvements, including canteens, secure play areas, and affordable amenities. On a broader scale, both women and experts emphasized the value of knowledge, solidarity, and unity, emphasizing that empowerment cannot be attained in a vacuum but must be developed by collective strength and knowledge sharing. The most transformative recommendations, which included reforming education, investing in youth, and deliberately normalizing women's

presence in mixed public settings, ultimately pointed toward societal change beyond only WOPS.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This conclusion brings together the main findings of this research, highlighting how women-only public spaces (WOPS) in Peshawar have the capacity to provide immediate safety, everyday agency, and physical and psychological well-being while also operating within a persistent framework of patriarchal constraints. It consolidates the key analytical contributions on intersectionality, positionality, and the spatial politics of gender, before moving into a “way forward.” By integrating practical recommendations into the conclusion, the chapter aims to emphasize short-term improvements to WOPS, various educational strategies, and collective capacities, and long-term goals for an inclusive public life where women’s presence is normalized beyond segregation.

Summary of Findings

The study’s conclusions highlight the inherent tension present within the dynamics of WOPS, specifically parks and buses, which were the focus of this research. These spaces have presented in themselves a transformative potential and function to bring short-, medium-, and long-term changes to the lives of women who can access them.

The methodological design of this study was purposeful in order to strengthen the conclusions and provide samples for wider applicability. By employing a mixed-method approach, the study recorded diverse voices across various intersectional groups, such as age, class, and social contexts, making sure that the findings represent a diverse spectrum of experiences. The use of both online and in-person surveys expanded accessibility, reaching women who might otherwise have remained excluded, whether due to a lack of digital literacy or

geographic isolation. Moreover, similarly, the decision to conduct interviews in multiple languages further ensured inclusivity and authenticity of responses and perspectives, allowing participants to convey opinions and perspectives candidly. The flexible and multi-layered design makes the study so that it is replicable in various other contexts and settings, whether they are conservative urban societies or global cities facing gendered mobility challenges.

This research aimed to answer three interrelated questions: what motivates women to use these spaces and what meanings they attach to them; how such spaces contribute to women's well-being, empowerment, and agency; and whether they challenge or reinforce patriarchal structures. The findings, literature, and general development trends indicate that these spaces occupy a contradictory position, as they are simultaneously safe havens and reminders of exclusion, both transformative and limited, serving as both strategies of resistance and bargains with patriarchy. WOPS offer immediate and tangible benefits for women, yet they also contribute to the very segregationist structures that necessitate their existence; this duality is crucial to understanding their relevance and situating their role within both local and global debates on gender, space, and empowerment. Furthermore, it emphasizes how crucial it is to see WOPS as stepping stones rather than as an endpoint: although they provide safety, empowerment, and quotidian agency in the short term, their long-term significance and transformative potential depend on whether or not they are supported by informed policy decisions that pave the way for increased accessibility and integration into the larger public sphere.

In attempting to explore the first research question, it was revealed that safety and freedom consistently emerged as significant motivators for women's engagement with these spaces, as evident in both the qualitative and quantitative data. Parks survey data showed that

87.7% of park users cited safety as their primary reason for visiting, with most respondents ranking comfort, freedom, and wellbeing as important factors in their decisions to access them. Moreover, 89.7% of bus users preferred gender-segregated compartments, with most respondents reporting that safety was a major factor in their decision to travel in segregated buses and that they would not travel as frequently without them. Narratives confirmed that for many women, especially younger ones under stricter household restrictions, gender segregation was the only acceptable pathway to public mobility.

Under these spaces, women articulated feelings of comfort, relaxation, and freedom from the continuous surveillance of men and potential harassment that characterized mixed environments. Women repeatedly described the relief they experienced through local expressions like *zra halka shi* (heart feels lighter) and *zra azaad shi* (heart feels free), framing the parks as judgment-free zones that allowed them to breathe and exist on their own terms. One woman remarked that when she visited a ladies' park, she felt "confident and empowered" in ways she did not experience in mixed public spaces, saying that the absence of men created the precondition for her to feel free. At the same time, however, structural and institutional barriers such as scarcity of public resources, distance, and lack of transport to these parks were major reported setbacks, with 33% of respondents citing accessibility issues as the greatest inconvenience and difficulty. Hence, while WOPS clearly meet an urgent need, their use is constrained by larger constraints.

The second research question focused on how these spaces can contribute to empowerment, agency, and well-being. This was addressed through various responses that required a multi-layered analysis rooted in cultural and contextual sensitivity, to avoid the application of strictly Western-centric frameworks that do a poor job of encapsulating the

differing dynamics of conservative societies. Data showed that more than 90% of park survey respondents reported visiting for mental health benefits, and 84% visited for physical health reasons, often linking their visits to management of chronic illnesses like diabetes, hypertension, and other noncommunicable diseases frequently associated with the restricted lifestyles of women in Peshawar. Interview participants also expressed appreciation for the opportunity to walk, exercise, or escape the confinement of small, crowded homes. Buses, meanwhile, expanded women's capacity for education and employment, with 83.3% of riders stating that BRT access improved their quality of life by enabling independent mobility. Various interview respondents expressed that they were able to start jobs and become financially empowered due to the ease of access provided by the buses. Others stated that without the BRT's segregated compartments, they would be unable to commute regularly for education or leisure activities, expressing fear of being isolated or confined. These findings highlight how WOPS serve as beneficial interventions in a context where domestic confinement, sedentary lifestyles, and restricted mobility exacerbate both physical and mental health burdens.

These benefits extended beyond health, as these parks emerged as potential affinity spaces where 80.7% of women reported socializing with others. Many women reported forming friendships in the parks, especially with women from the same villages, exchanging contact information, observing matchmaking among families, and establishing weekly group hangouts with women who frequented the parks. Women who were otherwise confined in their homes, isolated from a larger community, found these parks to be opportunities to connect, share experiences, and gain social support. Several participants noted that interactions with other women gave them a rare sense of belonging and solidarity, which reportedly led to increased confidence and a more positive outlook on life. All these reported social benefits align with

broader feminist theories about affinity spaces, which argue that collective gathering can become a form of empowerment in itself, even without overt political mobilization. Buses, too, became more than transit: they represented independence and dignity, with 93.5% of riders saying they felt good about traveling alone. A culmination of these findings suggests that empowerment is not simply individual but relational, realized through collective participation and solidarity, especially in societies where the fabric of society is essentially collective. Empowerment here is not only an end result, but, more appropriately, is also a process that involves expansions of agency, freedoms, and capabilities. This can expand an individual's "power within," to then impact their "power to" achieve and strive for better opportunities, alongside expanding the collective "power with" in their networks and communities, and eventually make an impact over factors pertaining to "power over," like resources, narratives, etc.

These same spaces, however, are simultaneously ambivalent in their relationship to the patriarchy, which was the focus of the third question. On the one hand, WOPS clearly challenge patriarchal exclusions by carving out visible, legitimate spaces for women's presence in public. Like affirmative action, positive discrimination, and equity-based development, they aim to normalize women's mobility, provide avenues for self-expression, and incrementally shift social norms about women's visibility in public spaces. The BRT's gender-segregated compartments, for example, increased women's ridership from around 2% on pre-BRT buses to 20–30% today, evidence of a social change made possible by segregation. On the other hand, these spaces risk reproducing the very patriarchal norms that necessitate them by embodying the notion that women can only be safe, mobile, and visible under the precondition of segregation and in isolation from men. Narratives of confinement due to "permission" showcase this clearly, with

various women explaining that their families allowed them to use buses or parks precisely because of segregation, meaning mobility remained conditional rather than absolute.

Women themselves were often found to be internalizing these norms, sometimes policing each other within women-only parks, urging a “culturally acceptable” dress code, or discouraging exercise, showcasing the ideas expressed in feminist literature as bargains with patriarchy for a longer-term guarantee of power and being gatekeepers through enacting symbolic violence. These, however, have been shown to manifest differently based on an individual’s class, education level, level of urbanism, conservatism, etc., hinting at the role intersectional factors play in the embodiment of different experiences and lived realities. Taken together, the “Catch-22” or the “double-edged” nature of these spaces can be seen through how they can empower in the short term, expand substantive freedoms and quotidian agency, but without broader social transformations, they can also entrench systemic exclusions.

Intersectional differences further complicate the dynamics at play. Age, for example, was a statistically significant predictor of perceived convenience, with older women reporting greater ease of park access, while younger women faced stricter restrictions. This difference showed up even within the same households, with older members often not considering permission to be a bigger factor; their accumulated social capital within the family structure enabled them to negotiate mobility for themselves in ways that were less accessible to younger women. While younger women continued to highlight restrictions imposed by male household members, like their fathers, husbands, brothers, and even their mothers-in-law, in some cases. However, this generational hierarchy did not operate in isolation. Instead, it intersected with patterns of intra-household solidarity, which emerged as an essential mediator of younger women’s access to quotidian agency. One intersecting sub-dynamic observed within this was that in extended or

joint households, where multiple female family members co-resided, younger women appeared to enjoy comparatively greater freedoms when accompanied or supported by elder women. For example, when older women of the household encouraged outings or took younger women with them, collective presence reduced the social risks and permission-related restrictions otherwise imposed by male household members. Moreover, mobility became framed less as an individual resistance and more as a family-approved activity, which offered younger women opportunities. In contrast, women living in nuclear households with only their husbands often described higher levels of restrictions on their mobility and greater isolation. This suggests that the absence of intra-household female allyship intensified their exposure to male gatekeepers and control. Women's empowerment and agency in a collectivist, conservative society can and should be characterized as relational and negotiated, not to be understood simply on an individual level, but must also be situated within intragenerational and intra-household alliances. Attempting to reproduce individual forms of empowerment in a collectivist society would reduce the overall efficacy of measures; instead, foregrounding the power in the collective would yield better analytical and pragmatic results. Elder women who, despite having navigated patriarchal bargains themselves but are now breaking the cycle of subjugation, frequently acted as facilitators of younger women's access to public life, demonstrating how solidarity within the household can function as a form of collective resistance to restrictive norms.

Class, also, was similarly decisive when considering women's interactions with these spaces. Although the quantitative data failed to reveal any statistically significant relationship between class and perceived convenience, the qualitative narratives presented a contrasting picture. Wealthier women circumvented patriarchal norms through private vehicles, while lower- and middle-income women depended heavily on segregated services, often describing

themselves as “helpless” or “like prisoners” without them. While class does play a significant role, it also interacts with various other intersecting factors of family educational background, degree of conservatism, age, and access to resources to create a layered effect that echoes Crenshaw’s “matrix of oppression” framework. Reiterating a key point, these disparities point towards the need for a context-specific, relational framework for understanding empowerment, one that situates women’s agency across macro, meso, and micro levels of analysis. Empowerment cannot simply be reduced to economic opportunities alone; it expands into physical health, social belonging, psychological well-being, and the ability to negotiate mobility within households. Development and policies that ignore these contexts risk benefiting only elites and those already benefitting from the existing status quo; this study shows that WOPS are meaningful exactly because they are embedded in localized negotiations of honor, religion, and family control.

These findings taken collectively suggest that WOPS in Peshawar are not endpoints or cures, as they are often treated in policy, but rather transitional arenas of empowerment. They offer important benefits like safety, mobility, and dignity, enabling women to experience independence and solidarity in environments otherwise marked by exclusion. However, at the same time, their very need and necessity highlight structural and institutional failures: the inability of urban planning, transport, and governance to create inclusive and safe public spaces. Without such integration, they run the risk of remaining fragile, tokenistic, and essentializing exclusion. They are both symptoms of exclusion and tools of resistance, both compromises with patriarchy and footholds for incremental transformation. This tension and paradox are precisely what make them compelling to feminist discourses about alternative empowerment, which is neither linear nor absolutely, but negotiated, relational, and heavily contingent.

Recommendations for Policymakers and Planners

To maximize the benefits of these spaces and bring out their true transformative potential and have them be embedded within broader strategies for gender equity, policymakers and planners should consider a set of realistic, context-sensitive measures around WOPS and other similar affirmative measures. These recommendations acknowledge the economic and institutional limitations of Pakistan's urban governance structures while also drawing on lessons from similar interventions within and outside of Pakistan.

First, there is a need for incremental but deliberate infrastructural improvements to the conditions and scope of existing women-only parks and transport services. Women repeatedly emphasized the absence of basic amenities, i.e., bathrooms, shaded seating, food stalls, and child-friendly areas, that would allow them to use these spaces more comfortably and for longer periods of time. Small-scale interventions like women-staffed canteens can have major impacts on both accessibility and women's informal economic participation. Experiences from cities like Cairo and Delhi show that investments in amenities within gender-sensitive transit and leisure spaces not only increase usage but also build public trust in institutional commitment. For Peshawar, this means prioritizing small, sustainable design choices that do not require large-scale funding but significantly improve women's everyday experiences.

Second, local accessibility and equitable distribution of WOPS should be treated as a crucial design choice for social justice within conservative contexts like Peshawar. As respondents point out, long distances and transport costs disproportionately impact low-income families, excluding them while situating WOPS in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. To mitigate this, municipal authorities can take a phased approach of introducing at least one

dedicated women's space per locality or union council, even if it starts off as a small community park. Drawing on participatory planning models from Latin America's "right to the city" movements (Rayner & Zamorano Villareal, 2021), embedding these spaces in localities where women already gather (e.g., bazaars, health clinics, or transit nodes) would improve access without necessitating high-cost standalone projects.

Third, WOPS must be staffed, managed, and secured in gender-sensitive ways. The presence of male gardeners, guards, and cleaners destabilizes women's sense of safety and contradicts the logic for segregation. Recruiting and training female staff, even on a rotating or contractual basis, would not only improve perceptions of safety but also generate employment opportunities for women in Peshawar. Similar initiatives in Peshawar's BRT and Lahore's Pink Bus service showcase that hiring female conductors for women-only compartments significantly increased ridership by reducing women's concerns about harassment, and encouraged women to seek help without hesitation.

Fourth, policy frameworks must directly integrate WOPS into wider urban and social planning goals, rather than treating them as isolated or tokenistic interventions. As the closure of Pardah Bagh shows, spaces created without institutional commitment and accountability can easily be withdrawn or impacted, measures that can have a disproportionately higher impact on women. Formalizing WOPS in provincial, municipal, and local budgets, plans, and development strategies would help ensure their continuity. Even low-cost measures like mandating gender impact assessments in urban planning and projects would institutionalize women's perspectives in decision-making. These parks, in themselves, provide a convenient and diverse female population that can be accessed for their perspectives, opinions, and deliberations.

Fifth, longer-term strategies must be incorporated into the federal and provincial planning frameworks to avoid the exact cycle that WOPS are stuck in, i.e., not normalizing women's presence in the public sphere but only providing short-term solutions to larger, societal problems. WOPS, while important affirmative measures, need to be seen as transitional and complemented with larger-scale educational and awareness-raising campaigns that address men's behavior and shift social norms. Tokyo's women-only train initiative shows that parallel investments in public education about harassment, rights-based messaging, and mixed-gender civic campaigns help avoid the entrenchment of segregationist logics. For Peshawar, working with youth through schools, religious institutions, and media is especially critical, given the city's demographic profile and the role of cultural honor codes in restricting women's mobility.

Finally, all such interventions should be realistic about funding and resource constraints. Peshawar faces the dual challenge of limited municipal budgets and competing developmental priorities. Large-scale or resource-intensive solutions may not be feasible or convenient in this context. Instead, gradual, low-cost, and participatory interventions like neighborhood-level parks, reallocation of existing spaces for women, and partnerships with NGOs already working on gender equity are realistic and pragmatic strategies that acknowledge economic realities while still progressing towards inclusion. Donor-funded projects (such as those by the World Bank or Asian Development Bank) could also be leveraged to integrate gender-sensitive planning into broader infrastructure schemes without placing disproportionate burdens on local budgets.

In sum, these recommendations highlight that WOPS in Peshawar should be treated as both immediate enablers of everyday agency and as stepping stones toward long-term structural change. By rooting design and policy choices in women's lived experiences, ensuring equitable access, and integrating these spaces within wider planning and social frameworks, policymakers

and planners can enable WOPS to move from fragile enclaves to sustainable, inclusive urban futures.

Limitations of the Study

While the findings provide important insights into the role of WOPS in conservative urban contexts, several limitations must be acknowledged. The research was geographically specific to Peshawar, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other cities or regions within and outside of Pakistan that differ on the basis of cultural, economic, or political dynamics. Logistical constraints, such as the closure of Pardah Bagh during the fieldwork, even though it was replaced by a different women-only park, reduced the diversity of park sites originally intended for inclusion across varying intra-city locations, narrowing the comparative scope. Moreover, while the mixed-method approach enabled a wider triangulation of data, time and resource constraints prevented the collection of a larger-scale quantitative analysis that may have further strengthened statistical representativeness by including more diversity across age, class, education levels, etc. Finally, the presence of the researcher, as well as cultural and linguistic dynamics during data collection, may have potentially influenced participant responses in subtle ways.

These limitations, while not seriously impacting the validity of the findings, suggest the need for further research across multiple contexts, utilizing longitudinal and comparative approaches to deepen understanding of the dynamics of WOPS.

Future Research

To comprehensively research and compare the ways in which WOPS function in various socio-cultural contexts, future research can expand beyond Peshawar to include a diversity of geographic focuses, including other Pakistani and international cities, as well as rural centers. Longitudinal research with a more extensive quantitative database would be a beneficial strategy to develop a broader understanding of these spaces, along with determining whether they are isolated interventions or promote longer-term social integration and empowerment. Furthermore, a more inclusive understanding of the structural dynamics that shape these places would be possible by including the viewpoints of a wider group of stakeholders, like male family members, urban planners, and policymakers. Lastly, focusing on intersectional differences across age, class, education, or disability would highlight how benefits and barriers are unevenly distributed among women of diverse groups.

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