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Unpaid Domestic Labour in *Pukhtun* Households: Invisibility, Recognition, and Political Subjectivity

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Abstract

This article examines the invisibility and undervaluation of women's unpaid domestic labour in Pukhtun households, despite its centrality to family well-being, everyday chores, and wider economic participation. We draw on feminist methodology and political ethnography. The study is based on interviews, time-use diaries, and participant observation in rural Mardan and urban Peshawar. Three themes emerge: the unequal distribution of burden and recognition, where women's continuous labour is naturalised while men's intermittent contributions are celebrated; the translation of this invisibility into women's limited authority in household decision-making; and the intersection of paid domestic work with class and gender hierarchies that reinforce precarity. The analysis shows that time poverty, honour codes, and spatial practices in the home render women's work indispensable yet politically erased. Small acts of refusal, bargaining, and solidarity reveal constrained but significant political subjectivities. We argue that recognising unpaid domestic labour requires not only legal protections for paid workers and investment in public care infrastructure, but also culturally grounded organising strategies that make invisible labour visible and actionable in Pukhtun contexts.

Keywords: *Unpaid domestic labour, Women's labour, Pukhtun households, Gender justice, Care economy*

INTRODUCTION

In Pukhtun (Pashtun) homes, as in many societies, the routine labour that keeps everyday life running, cooking, washing, ironing, cleaning, preparing children for school, fetching water, and tending the sick and elderly, is overwhelmingly performed by women. This labour remains chronically undervalued in economic, legal, policy, and even in private accounts. As Michelle Chen observes, "around the world, private homes are becoming labour's latest battleground as domestic workers stake out their rights" (Chen, 2013). Although domestic work is essential to the reproduction of households and extends across every region of the world, it is routinely rendered private and naturalised as "women's work" (known in Pashto as da khazo kar). Consequently, it has historically been excluded from formal mechanisms of labour protection and social policy. The International Labour Organization's instruments on decent work for domestic workers (Convention No. 189 and Recommendation No. 201) were a historic step toward recognising domestic work as work (ILO, 2011), and more recent ILO research reconceptualises unpaid care and domestic labour as part of the broader "care economy," arguing for policy measures that count, protect and invest in care (ILO, 2020).

In Pakistan, empirical studies in this regard repeatedly show that both paid and unpaid household carers operate within informal, precarious arrangements that leave them exposed to low pay, insecure hours, and limited social protection (Bilal et al., 2024; Shafeeq et al., 2022). Research in Pakistani cities documents long hours, exploitation, weak legal coverage, and social surveillance of domestic workers, while complementary studies of unpaid household labour highlight time-poverty and the opportunity costs borne by women who perform invisible care work (Bilal et al., 2024; Butt & Khan, 2019; Shafeeq et al., 2022). These findings confirm that domestic labour is not merely a private matter but a political-economic problem with implications for gender justice, labour rights, and social policy.

In this study, we reframe unpaid household labour, routine house chores carried out predominantly by women in Pukhtun households, as a form of political practice that produces specific political subjectivities and limited but meaningful forms of claims-making. We building on

Kim England's spatial politics of domestic work (England, 2017), and argue that home must be read as a contested political field: a site where labour is simultaneously necessary and hidden, where the boundary between private and public is policed by social norms (notably Pukhtunwali values such as ghairat (honour) and pardah (veil)), and where everyday acts of negotiation, withdrawal and tactical redistribution operate as nascent political moves rather than as formal mobilisation. England's spatial lens helps us see how the making of the home, its thresholds, courtyards, and guest spaces, structures both labour and the possibilities for recognition.

We distinguish between paid domestic workers, persons employed by households to provide domestic services (cleaning, cooking, childcare, elder care), and unpaid household carers, which refers to the routine, non-remunerated work carried out by women who are members of the household (wives, daughters, sisters, and other female kin). Following Marxist social-reproduction theory, we treat unpaid domestic labour as productive work that reproduces labour power and therefore as politically and economically consequential; at the same time, we preserve the analytical distinction between paid employment relationships and unpaid familial labour because legal protections, forms of exploitation, and possibilities for collective organising differ across these categories. In local terms, this unpaid work is often spoken of as da kor kar (home's work), a phrase we will retain throughout the paper to foreground cultural meaning and local voice.

To illustrate how spatial moral worlds shape domestic labour and its political implications, the study opens with three composite vignettes drawn from ethnographic patterns in rural and urban Pukhtun households.

Vignette 1 — "The Morning that Never Ends." Amina Bibi (48) wakes up before dawn in a joint-family compound. Her day is a succession of interrupted tasks, for instance, preparing and serving da sahari chai (morning tea), readying children, tending the elderly, sweeping guest areas in anticipation of visitors, and cooking for large evening gatherings. In the Pukhtun moral economy, visible hospitality equals honour. While a poorly tended home signals moral failure. For Amina, housework is not merely labour but a moral performance that constrains her mobility and curtails economic opportunities.

Vignette 2 — "Boundaries and Surveillance." Saba Gul, a young live-out worker from a nearby village. She must navigate strict spatial rules inside her employer's home, where she may enter, when she can use the courtyard, and how she should present herself before guests and the employer's family. These spatial arrangements, grounded in familial honour and privacy, make her indispensable yet policed. The attempts to bargain or organise are framed as threats to family reputation.

Vignette 3 — "Withholding and Small Claims." Fatima, who works part-time at a clinic, refuses one morning to cook after a night shift. Her partial withdrawal forces male relatives to perform tasks they typically avoid and are not considered their work. Such acts of refusal produce a short-lived redistribution of labour, a tactical, private claim that reorders household norms without public protest.

These vignettes indicate two central propositions. First, unpaid domestic labour in Pukhtun settings is embedded in moral geographies, honour, hospitality, and gendered respectability, which make care both socially visible and institutionally invisible. Second, the micro-spatial organisation of homes, thresholds, guest areas, kitchens, and courtyards mediates how labour is performed, policed, and sometimes politicised. England's (2017) spatial emphasis suggests that legal reform or social protection measures that ignore these micro-geographies risk missing how care is produced and contested in everyday life.

While studies in Pakistan have largely examined paid domestic workers, labour precarity, and legal protections, they rarely centre unpaid domestic labour inside households or analyse how spatial norms such as pardah, ghairat, and guest–host hierarchies structure women's labour and limit their political voice. No existing work brings together social reproduction, spatial politics, and

feminist care ethics to explain how women develop political subjectivities from within the home. This study directly addresses that gap.

Therefore, we ask: how does unpaid domestic labour produce political subjectivity for women in Pukhtun households, and in what forms do these everyday practices open (or foreclose) possibilities for recognition, rights, and redistribution? Empirically, we employ semi-structured interviews, short time-use diaries, and participant observation in rural and urban Pukhtun communities to map tasks, temporal burdens, and acts of negotiation. Analytically, we bring together Marxist social-reproduction perspectives and feminist care theory alongside a spatial politics of the home to show that domestic labour is not merely private labour but a crucible for emerging political claims. The claims that demand policy responses attentive both to the care economy and to the lived spatial and moral contexts of Pukhtun life.

Da Khazo Kar and Beyond: Locating Domestic Labour in Global and *Pukhtun* Contexts

The phrase *da khazo kar*, which means "women's work" in *Pukhto*. It captures how housework has been naturalised as a familial duty rather than recognised as labour. Yet, as Marxist-feminist debates since the 1970s have insisted, these everyday house chores are not marginal but central to the reproduction of labour power and therefore to the functioning of capitalism itself (Rowbotham, 1973; Rubin, 1975). Building on this legacy, feminist scholars have tracked that domestic labour is rendered invisible through its location in the home and its coding as intimate, private, and natural (Anderson, 2000; Duffy, 2011). At the same time, more recent interventions, especially Kim England (2017), argue that the home is not a neutral container but a contested space where labour is organised, surveilled, and sometimes transformed into political claims. We situate our study within this conversation, to bring these global insights into dialogue with empirical work on Pakistan, where both paid domestic workers and unpaid carers face precarity, invisibility, and the weight of *Pukhtun* cultural codes such as *ghairat* (honour) *and pardah* (veil) and hospitality.

England (2017) insists the home is not merely a site of private obligations but a spatially organised workplace where questions of intimacy, honour, and surveillance shape labour relations and limit conventional organising strategies. We find this spatial insistence indispensable for our *Pukhtun* focus. England's reworking of the ILO's operationalisation, which states that "domestic work" is work performed in or for a household and that a "domestic worker" participates in an employment relationship, clarifies why legal instruments (like C189) are necessary but insufficient. The workplace here is someone else's home, which makes labour relations intimate, dispersed, and hard to collectivise.

The ILO's policy and empirical work strengthen England's claim by supplying scale and policy frames. The ILO's Convention 189 (2011) and subsequent reports on the care economy argue that recognising domestic work as work and investing in care infrastructure are essential steps toward gender-equitable labour markets (ILO, 2011; ILO, 2018). Additionally, as recent ILO briefs and "Care at Work" syntheses show, counting and financing care also requires attention to local normative worlds and to who actually provides care: in many contexts, the majority of carers remain unpaid family members and thus fall outside legal remedies (ILO, 2018; ILO, 2022). We, therefore, read ILO policy as necessary scaffolding, an important normative baseline, but not a substitute for a grounded analysis of how home-spaces and moral economies mediate recognition and redistribution.

Local empirical literature from Pakistan confirms the dual problem that England and the ILO identify. The identified problem of domestic labour is widespread and gendered, yet organisational and legal protections remain thin. Qualitative studies document low pay, irregular hours, surveillance, and precarity among paid domestic workers (Shafeeq et al., 2022; Zulfiqar, 2021). Additionally, other Pakistan-focused work highlights the severe time-poverty and opportunity costs faced by unpaid household carers (Butt & Khan, 2019). We emphasise the dialogue among these studies: the paid-worker literature shows the forms of commodified

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exploitation in the informal labour market, and the unpaid-labour studies show the social reproduction costs that make outsourcing possible in the first place. Together, they create a dialectic that our paper aims to make explicit, which are the outsourcing and unpaid family labour are two sides of the same political-economic process.

Where we depart from much of the Pakistan literature is in centring *unpaid* household labour, not as a residual category but as the political problem itself. Most Pakistan studies understandably focus on paid domestic workers because of the immediate policy implications (wages, contracts, provincial acts). But if, as Marxist social-reproduction theory insists, unpaid household labour reproduces labour power and subsidises the formal economy, then ignoring the unpaid inside the family risks missing the primary mechanism that produces domestic-labour markets and gendered inequality. The spatial frame of England offers the critical bridge: the household's micro-geographies (courtyards, guest rooms, *pardah* practices, norms of *ghairat*) not only organise unpaid labour but shape the conditions under which paid domestic labour is hired, regulated, or policed.

Finally, feminist and post-colonial critiques remind us to historicise these arrangements. The migration and commodification of domestic work are entangled with post-colonial labour regimes, caste and class hierarchies, and gendered moral economies. Michelle Chen's reportage and scholarship on domestic workers' mobilisations point to the global emergence of claims-making from private homes to public law (Chen, 2013). We therefore argue that a productive scholarly move is to hold three registers together: Marxist social reproduction (why unpaid housework reproduces capitalism), England's spatial politics (how homes structure visibility and claims), and post-colonial feminist attention to race, migration and local moral codes (what specific historical formations make *Pukhtun* homes sites of both constraint and tactical politics). Our study steps into this gap of rarely theorised unpaid household carers by analysing unpaid domestic labour in *Pukhtun* households as a form of political practice that is produced, policed and at times politicised within the micro-geographies of the home.

THEORY

Our study conceptualises unpaid domestic labour (da khazo kar) in Pukhtun households as a site where capitalist reproduction, cultural codes, state retreat, and feminist ethics converge. Building on Marxist social-reproduction theory, we argue that household labour is not incidental but constitutive of capitalism. The daily and intergenerational reproduction of labour power, feeding, cleaning, raising children, caring for the family, subsidises waged labour and sustains accumulation (Rowbotham, 1973; Rubin, 1975). In addition, precisely because this work is located in homes and naturalised as "women's work", it remains invisible in both policy and economic accounting (Armstrong, 2012; Albin & Mantouvalou, 2012). In Pukhtun contexts, this invisibility is reinforced by the culture of pardah and ghairat, which honours women's labour morally while simultaneously denying it economic value.

Kim England's (2017) spatial politics of domestic work enables us to push this point further. The home is not a neutral backdrop but a workplace whose thresholds, kitchens, courtyards, and guest rooms structure visibility, regulate who can enter, and constrain the possibility of collective action. For Pukhtun women, spatial arrangements do more than organise labour; they embed it in moral economies where hospitality becomes publicly visible and judged, while routine chores are hidden as "natural" or "women-specific". In this way, the home both reproduces and disciplines labour. Everyday practices such as withdrawal from chores, renegotiating tasks, or tactical redistribution are thus not merely private disputes but emergent political acts shaped by spatial and cultural constraints.

The structural and spatial dimensions of unpaid labour intersect with the retreat of the state and the neoliberal restructuring of care. Domestic work has long been excluded from many labour protections, minimum wages, overtime, and compensation that render both paid and

unpaid carers vulnerable (Dresser, 2008). Although ILO Convention 189 (2011) marked a turning point in recognising domestic work, subsequent evidence shows that unpaid family carers still fall outside protective regimes (ILO, 2011, 2022). Feminist political economy critiques have linked this exclusion to neoliberal austerity, which shifts responsibility for care away from the state and onto households, with women shouldering the burden (Folbre, 2001; Piven, 2015). In Pakistan, where state provision of childcare, eldercare, and health remains weak, this retreat is deeply felt. In Pukhtun households, especially, the absence of social infrastructure fuses with cultural codes, producing what we call a moralised care deficit: women's unpaid labour compensates for systemic gaps while being legitimised as a familial and honour-bound duty.

Finally, feminist care ethics reframes these dynamics by insisting that care is not a private obligation but a public good fundamental to human life. As Tronto (2013) reminds us, "we are all care receivers" (p. 146), and this recognition disrupts neoliberal notions of autonomy by foregrounding interdependence. Reading unpaid domestic labour in Pukhtun households through this lens means acknowledging that women's everyday negotiations, whether withholding, bargaining, or quietly redistributing tasks, constitute political practices. While they may not take the form of formal mobilisation, they nonetheless represent situated claims to recognition and redistribution. When combined, these perspectives form our conceptual framework. Unpaid household labour in Pukhtun households is structurally central to capitalism, spatially organised by moral and material architectures of the home, politically intensified by the retreat of state care provision, and ethically reframed as a public good whose denial generates subtle but meaningful forms of political subjectivity.

RESEARCH METHODS

To meet the purpose of the study, we adopted a qualitative research design grounded in feminist methodology and political ethnography. Since our concern is the everyday labour of women in Pukhtun households, we prioritise methods that illuminate lived experience, temporal burdens, and the moral and spatial orders through which unpaid work is organised. Rather than treating "domestic labour" as an abstract category, we approach it as an embodied practice situated in kor (the home) and embedded in local codes of ghairat, pardah, and hospitality.

Our fieldwork was conducted in both rural and urban Pukhtun communities in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Rural fieldwork was conducted in Tordher and Kalo Shah of rural Mardan, and urban fieldwork was carried out in University Town, Peshawar. The former are our villages, respectively, and the latter is where we studied for our Bachelor's degrees. This comparative strategy allowed us to trace how domestic labour is differently structured in extended family compounds, small village households, and nuclear families in urban settings. In total, we conducted 22 semi-structured interviews: 15 with unpaid household women (across Tordher and Kalo Shah) and 7 with paid domestic workers in urban households (University Town). Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure variation in age, marital status, household structure, and labour role. Participants included married women (wives, daughters-in-law), unmarried daughters, and, for contrast, several paid domestic workers employed in urban homes. This combination highlights the distinction between unpaid familial labour and paid household service, while foregrounding our central concern with unpaid labour.

For data collection, we employed three methods. First, semi-structured interviews with women elicited narratives of daily work, negotiations within households, and strategies of withdrawal or redistribution. Second, short-term time-use diaries were developed with selected participants to map hours spent on specific tasks that reveal the intensity and fragmentation of domestic labour. Third, participant observation within homes and communal spaces (courtyards, kitchens, guest rooms) enabled us to record how spatial arrangements, household hierarchies, and social obligations shaped labour. Together, these methods provide both narrative and temporal-

spatial accounts of women's work. The data were analysed thematically, guided by our conceptual framework. We coded transcripts and diaries for patterns of invisibility, negotiation, and claims-making, and situated these within broader discourses of social reproduction, spatial politics, and feminist care ethics. Attention was paid to how micro-practices, such as refusing to cook after night shifts, redistributing chores during illness, or managing hospitality labour, indexed forms of political subjectivity. In this way, analysis moved from the concrete detail of household tasks to broader questions of recognition, rights, and redistribution.

We approached this research with feminist commitments to reciprocity, confidentiality, and respect for participants' voices. Consent was obtained verbally, recognising literacy constraints, and pseudonyms are used throughout. As Pukhtun researchers and cultural insiders, our insider position facilitated access and cultural sensitivity but also required reflexivity, particularly regarding gendered access to women's spaces. We negotiated this by collaborating with trusted female interlocutors and by carefully balancing participation with respect for household norms.

DISCUSSION

In this section, our empirically grounded interpretation synthesises interview narratives, time-use diaries and participant observation with comparative and historical scholarship to show how unpaid domestic labour (and carers) in Pukhtun households is produced, experienced and (occasionally) contested. Below, we analyse and discuss data that we have divided into three themes.

Invisible Burden and Unequal Recognition: A Woman's Work

In the first theme, we analyse how domestic labour is routinised as an invisible subsidy to household and market life, even as small acts and narratives reveal the strain and the desire for recognition. A persistent pattern across interviews, diaries, and observation is the normalisation of unending labour. The women we interviewed describe days that have no discrete beginning or end; their working time is fragmented into continuous micro-tasks rather than bounded shifts. Meena Gul's complaint, "From fajr till midnight, there is no end to her work", is not an exaggeration but a temporal diagnosis. Her life, like many of our participants, is organised around continuous interruptions: preparing tea, child-care, cleaning, fetching water, tending elders and readying guest spaces. Similarly, Saima's two-day diary quantified this fragmentation: roughly 6 hours/day of food preparation, 3.5 hours cleaning, 4 hours childcare and less than 1 hour of personal rest. These figures are not merely time-use statistics; they reveal to us how time itself, the basic currency of social life and possibility for paid work, education or political engagement, is systematically appropriated by unpaid household demands. This means that a woman's life is spent more for others than for herself. The whole unpaid household carers phenomenon is not an accident; rather, as Marxist social-reproduction perspectives underline, the daily and intergenerational reproduction of labour power is a structural condition of capitalist accumulation (Rowbotham, 1973; Rubin, 1975). In Pukhtun households, reproduction is enacted as da khazo kar (woman's work) and embodied in women's time-poverty.

In addition, recognition is also unequally distributed. Our interviews repeatedly show that men's small contributions are celebrated while women's continuous labour is treated as default or "natural". Meena Gul, for instance, told, "When my son fetches water from the cooler, he praises him as if he has fought a battle". The contradiction between her unending chores and the applause for her son fetching water dramatises this inequality: men's intermittent help becomes socially

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valorised precisely because it is exceptional, whereas women's labour is invisible because it is certain and expected. This phenomenon is indicative of how social reproduction is gendered: the reproduction of labour power is taken for granted and therefore uncounted. This pattern resonates with historical accounts that domestic service has long been culturally relegated to apprenticeship and tradition rather than recognised as an occupation (Salmon, 1897); contemporary ethnographies in Pakistan show similar dynamics of marginality and spatial segregation (Zulfiqar, 2018). The invisible subsidy of da khazo kar, therefore, functions as a private subsidy to market activity: households participate in the market without paying (or demanding) for the full social cost of care. Salmon (1897) also mentions how knowledge about household activities is considered as something to be learned through traditions and as an inherent part of a woman's life, reinforcing the notion that domestic work was only "woman's work".

The status gap between visible and invisible forms of labour is also spatially mediated. Participant observation in extended compounds and urban houses shows that certain chores are staged for social visibility (cleaning the hujra/guest room before visitors), while the most time-consuming, physically demanding tasks (kitchen work, continuous washing) are relegated to hidden spaces. Bano's comment — "If a guest comes and the house is not clean, it is a shame for the whole family" — highlights how hospitality labour is publicly judged and thus prioritised, even at the cost of women's rest or health. England's argument that the home operates as a workplace whose thresholds and guest spaces regulate labour and bargaining power helps explain this choreography: visibility is moralised and thus separated from economic recognition (England, 2017).

"Last week, I told my husband to cook breakfast because I had a fever. He laughed, but when he tried, he burnt the rotai (flatbread). After that, he never complained again when I said I was too tired to cook. For me, this was a small victory." (Yasmeen, 28, Peshawar).

Acts of everyday refusal and renegotiation in Yasmeen's "small victory", where asking the husband to cook led to a lasting change, illustrate how nascent political subjectivities emerge inside households. These acts are tactical and often temporary, but they matter. From a care-ethics perspective, tactical withdrawal asserts the embodied needs of carers and exposes the moral claim that care should be reciprocal (Tronto, 2013). Importantly, such micro-politics convert private grievances into observable labour: when men must perform household tasks, they momentarily recognise the labour previously hidden. These moments do not, however, translate automatically into structural change. They reveal the limits of household-level bargaining in the absence of broader social infrastructure and legal protections. Joan Tronto offers the hopeful message that "changing the value of care in democratic societies permits us to recast issues of inclusion, dependency, and creating more just democratic societies" (p. 12).

The combination of continuous burden, performative honour, and episodic recognition points to a structural paradox. On the one hand, da khazo kar is constitutive of household viability and market participation; on the other hand, it is persistently devalued because it is gendered, spatially hidden, and culturally normalised. The result is a double invisibility, economic invisibility (not counted in wage or social protection systems) and political invisibility (not recognised as a legitimate site of claims-making). This invisibility aligns with the broader retreat of state responsibility for care: without social infrastructure (childcare, eldercare, paid leave), households, and within them women, absorb the costs. At the same time, the empirical seeds of political subjectivity are visible in the data. Repeated narratives of exhaustion, humiliation and occasional

small victories produce a collective reflexivity: women identify injustice and sometimes act. These micro-practices, withholding, bargaining, and tactical redistribution, are the earliest forms of claim-making. As Coltrane (2000) shows, making household work visible (through time-use documentation, ethnography, and narratives) is a prerequisite for policy recognition and social protection. Our findings thus converge with global and local scholarship: documenting time, staging visibility, and linking household tactics to broader demands are necessary steps toward revaluing domestic labour.

Household Bargains, Authority and the Politics of Decision-Making

We move from burden to bargaining: here we show how unpaid domestic labour structures women's voice in household decisions while tracing the small, uneven ways women negotiate authority. Drawing on interviews, diaries and observations from Tordher, Kalo Shah and University Town, and engaging the wider literature on social reproduction and household decision-making, we argue that labour performed without pay translates directly into limited voice — though not into total powerlessness. The home is a site of negotiated authority where class, gender and spatial arrangements condition who decides and who merely does. Jameela described doing the house's daily labour while being excluded from major decisions:

"I prepare the children, pay attention to their homework, and run to get medicines. But when it comes to school fees or the decision to send a son or nephew to the city for a job, my opinion is not asked — they say I am too busy 'inside'." Jameela (40, Tordher, joint family).

Jameela's experience demonstrates that exclusion from household decision-making is enacted through cultural scripting as much as economic realities. The phrase "too busy 'inside'" functions as a delegitimising trope that frames unpaid reproductive labour as incompatible with strategic thinking, thereby justifying male and elder dominance over major decisions (e.g., schooling, migration, large purchases). The result is a double bind: women must perform the labour that sustains the household, yet are denied the status to influence the very choices that shape family trajectories. This relational dynamic links time-poverty to symbolic disqualification and explains why simply increasing women's paid work may be necessary but not always sufficient to transform decision-making norms (Federici, 2018; Gómez-Valle & Holvoet, 2022).

Hajra's time-use diary (Kalo Shah) furnishes quantitative texture to these claims. Over two days, she reported roughly 3 hours/day cooking, 5 hours washing clothes, cleaning rooms, home and other chores, 3 hours childcare, 1.5 hours caring for an elderly mother-in-law, sometimes hospitality tasks, and less than 2 hours to take rest. Hajra told us that because her days are split into recurrent micro-tasks, she rarely attends Gham-Khadi (sorrow and joy) community meetings or even visits the bazaar without permission. Time-poverty, therefore, functions as a structural limiter on civic and household participation: when the daily schedule is determined by uninterrupted care demands, the opportunity to assert preferences in family deliberations shrinks. This echoes broader findings that time scarcity curtails women's ability to convert voice into influence (Gómez-Valle & Holvoet, 2022).

Our participant observations show how spatial theatre compounds these dynamics. In Tordher, the Da Masharai Kota (the elder's room) is ritualistically prepared by women each morning; elder male relatives then gather there for visitors and deliberations. We recorded an episode in which Seema, having finished cleaning the elder's room, was asked to fetch refreshments

for the men discussing a land sale, present physically, she was not permitted into the deliberative circle. This embodied marginality — visible labour, invisible voice — reproduces decision-making hierarchies. The elder's room thus functions both as a moral stage, where women's labour secures family honour, and as a literal spatial barrier to participation. On the contrary, University Town, Peshawar, where the spatial segregation of paid domestic workers is striking. We observed Saba, a paid domestic worker, instructed to wait near the kitchen and to serve from doorways when guests arrived; she was explicitly forbidden from entering the sitting room. As a paid worker, Saba's labour is commodified, but spatial exclusion renders her even less able to make claims within that household. This underscores two interacting patterns: paid domestic workers are marginalised by employer–employee power and physical exclusion, whereas unpaid household women are marginalised by time-poverty and normative expectations. In both cases, labour location and access to decision spaces shape voice and agency.

Moreover, class, too, shapes bargaining outcomes. Where households outsource care, the employer–employee relation is itself gendered and classed: paid domestic workers are spatially segregated, excluded from decision spaces, and vulnerable to abuse (Milkman et al., 1998; Romero, 1992; Zulfiqar, 2018). In wealthier households that can hire help, the ability to outsource can increase women's public participation, but only if outsourcing replaces rather than supplements unpaid care. Our interviews with daughters-in-law in households that employed maids revealed mixed results: some women gained time for work or study, while others simply transferred care expectations (supervising maids, managing hospitality). This leaves decision power unchanged. As scholars have argued, the conversion of domestic labour into paid work (either by hiring or by women entering the paid labour market) can alter decision structures, but only if it changes economic dependency (Bradshaw, 2013; Hunter, 2017).

The policy implications follow directly from these dynamics. Strengthening women's bargaining power requires both redistribution of care time (affordable childcare, community eldercare, public services, paid family leave) and symbolic recognition (time-use accounting, community dialogues and male-engagement programs) that change the normative valuation of care. Without institutional scaffolding to shift both time and status, household bargains will remain contingent and uneven — producing occasional reprieves but not systemic shifts in authority.

Care, Precarity, and the Politics of Recognition

The third theme, the ethics of care and the political language that frames domestic labour as "the work that makes all other work possible", translates into collective claims in Pukhtun contexts. Our interviews reveal two intertwined realities: the moral centrality of care, and the precariousness of those who provide it when paid. Ayesha (32, Tordher, wife & daughter-in-law) captured the first: "We keep this home so that everyone can leave for work with a full stomach. People say our house is blessed, but they don't ask if I am well." These words of Ayesha confirm England's claim that domestic labour "makes all work possible" while remaining erased from labour protections (England, 2017). This moral framing generates social respect but not rights. It produces social indebtedness without economic recompense.

At the same time, paid carers face acute exploitation. Nasreen (30, University Town, paid domestic worker) told us: "They pay me little and tell me not to complain. If I ask for more, I am warned I won't have work tomorrow." The fear she carries reflects findings from Pakistan and

beyond: low wages, wage deductions, long hours, and abuse are commonplace, and many workers tolerate mistreatment for lack of alternatives (Romero, 1992; Milkman et al., 1998; Zulfiqar, 2018). Observationally, we watched Nasreen clean under strict rules about where she could stand and how she should speak to those visiting the workplace, a choreography of exclusion that renders labour both intimate and surveilled. This combination of commodification and marginality makes traditional union organising difficult: domestic labour is dispersed across private homes, workplaces are intimate, and workers often lack a stable common space (Boris & Nadasen, 2008). Nevertheless, comparative cases point to viable organising logics that might be adapted to Pukhtun terrains. In the United States, domestic-worker initiatives (worker centres) reframed care ethics into broad coalitions, local research, and legal campaigns pairing moral claims with hard data to win municipal and state reforms (Poo & DWU, 2010; Burnham & Theodore, 2012). Community-based participatory research and coalition-building were decisive: activists generated localised statistics, created employer-accountability toolkits, and built cross-class alliances that made the private workplace politically legible.

What might such a pathway look like in Pukhtun communities, given local constraints? Our fieldwork suggests three grounded possibilities, first, community-rooted visibility projects. In Pukhtun society, women and men gather for Gham-Khadi rituals and informal visits; these existing social nodes could be entry points for time-use mapping and storytelling projects that publicly document da khazo kar (women's work), and make invisible hours visible in communal form. Second, women-only solidarity groups that work within cultural norms of gender segregation, several participants suggested meeting with trusted female kin to exchange information and pool small cash supports, a low-risk, high-trust form of organising that can build capacity without directly confronting male elders. Third, alliances with sympathetic local institutions (health clinics, teachers, progressive individuals or girls' schools) that can lend legitimacy and a public platform for care-recognition campaigns. Such coalitions echo a broad-based strategy but are adapted to Pukhtun moral economies and mobility constraints.

Our fieldwork and observation underscore why these locally tailored strategies matter. In one University Town household, we noted that the employer's own daughter confided privately that she "never understood" how much work the maid did until she had to cover a sick day. This suggests potential empathy among younger household members who can become allies. In Tordher, elder women, who command moral authority, may act as brokers for modest reforms (rotating tasks during illness, community childcare shares) where direct public confrontation would be culturally fraught. Yet significant obstacles remain. The retreat of state care provision and uneven labour law enforcement in Pakistan means that reliance on voluntary employer goodwill or ad hoc household bargains will not deliver durable protections (Shafeeq et al., 2022). Moreover, paid domestic workers who are migrants, low-income, or undocumented face heightened vulnerability and legal invisibility (Burnham & Theodore, 2012; Romero, 1992). Any movement toward recognition, therefore, requires dual tactics: (a) grassroots visibility and mutual-aid projects that build capacity and local legitimacy; and (b) strategic policy engagement, using community-generated data to press local authority or provincial authorities to extend labour protections, enforce minimum standards, and invest in public care infrastructure.

Finally, a care-ethics framing can be politically generative if it links moral claims to concrete demands, time-use accounting, paid family leave, minimum standards for paid domestic work, and

community childcare. For Pukhtun contexts, the political project must respect local culture (honour codes, gendered space) while slowly expanding the terrain of legitimate public intervention into care. In short, making visible that domestic labour "makes all work possible" is a necessary first move; translating that visibility into rights will require culturally attuned organising, mutually supportive community structures, and targeted policy advocacy.

CONCLUSION

We, in this study, traced the multiple layers through which women's unpaid domestic labour in *Pukhtun* society is normalised, invisibilised, and yet indispensable to household and societal reproduction. Grounded in fieldwork across rural Mardan and urban Peshawar, our analysis showed that the burdens of care are not simply personal but structural. They are embedded in time poverty, cultural scripts of honour, and the spatial organisation of homes. To this end, we analyse three themes. The first demonstrated how women's continuous labour is treated as natural, while men's occasional help is praised, which produces a contradiction of indispensability without recognition. Second, the study highlighted how this invisibility translates into restricted household authority, where women sustain daily life but are excluded from strategic decisions. The third, identified, was the frame by considering paid domestic labour, and the employment status intersects with gender to shape vulnerability, exploitation, and the politics of recognition.

Across these contexts, women's experiences point to a shared reality: households depend on their labour, yet the value of that labour remains unsecured. At the same time, everyday acts of refusal, negotiation, and mutual support show that women continue to find ways to assert themselves, even within constrained spaces. The contrast between unpaid familial labour and paid domestic work further reveals that both groups of women confront different forms of marginality, whether through time scarcity, spatial exclusion, or employer control.

These findings underline the need for practical steps that can reduce vulnerability and enhance recognition. Public investment in care services, stronger labour protections for domestic workers, and community-based initiatives that acknowledge and redistribute care responsibilities are essential for easing the burden carried by women. Locally grounded forms of solidarity and collective visibility can help bring these concerns into everyday conversation and open space for gradual change. Conclusively, domestic labour in *Pukhtun* society is not only foundational to household functioning but also a site where struggles for dignity and fair treatment unfold. The study aims to highlight the importance of valuing this work and to create pathways through which the everyday efforts of women can translate into broader social and institutional recognition.

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