

Repositioning Professional Identity during COVID 19 Lock Down: Recording the Lived Experiences of Female School Teachers

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Abstract: *This paper is based on a case study of a public sector school aiming to get an in-depth insiders' view on the complex phenomenon of repositioning professional identity among school teachers during the COVID-19 lockdown. Scholarship has already highlighted the issue of the negotiated identity of women during the pandemic (Safdar & Yasmin, 2020), though how female school teachers experience this phenomenon has been missed out. Considering the significance as well as unavailability of literature on this issue, this paper is going to unravel the process of identity renegotiation among female teachers and aspires to contribute to the body of knowledge revealing the impact of COVID on human behaviour and life. This paper will also discuss the implications and extend guidance for future research in this field.*

Key Words: Female Teachers, Identity, Renegotiation, COVID-19, Pakistan.

Introduction

The coronavirus has affected everyone's life; schools and educational institutions across the country have been closed as a preventive step against the novel coronavirus since the emergence of COVID-19 (Ferozi, 2020). COVID-19 has necessitated numerous societal adjustments, including those in education, which are likely to be cognitively and emotionally challenging for working women (teachers) (Kim & Asbury, 2020). Following the outbreak of a new coronavirus in 2019, most institutions converted from traditional offline to online education, resulting in a plethora of concerns, including physical and mental health issues among faculty (Chen et

al., 2020). When the COVID-19 virus's potential health concerns became clear in early 2020, practically every country closed schools and sent students home. Since then, governments have been experimenting with various reopening tactics as the public's attention has been drawn to the pressing health and safety issues surrounding schools (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020). School closures also have an impact on households, as they must adjust to increased childcare needs for children who have returned home, which will disproportionately affect women, who will be burdened with greater responsibilities (UNDP, 2020). COVID-19 has been dubbed "a tragedy for feminism" in the popular press, as increased care commitments in the context of a

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pandemic have a severe influence on women (Berkhout & Richardson, 2020). COVID and the lockdown have increased the burden on women in terms of increased unpaid labour, domestic and sexual violence, and socioeconomic hardship (Shodiq & Syamsudin, 2019). Across the globe, teaching from home was the new trend during the COVID lockdown, and the same was actualized in Pakistan; albeit the situation and people at home created quite a complex situation for 'working from home', especially for women in Pakistan. As highlighted by Safdar and Yasmin (2020), "pandemic has reinforced the vulnerability of the women's nascent negotiated identity by landing them in a space where they are supposed by the normative structures to step back to carrying out their traditional responsibilities as 'good' wife and mother" (p.684). Literature argues that working women have worked while taking a full load of family responsibilities during COVID 19 lockdown. This "increased burden of unrecognized unpaid domestic labour and domestic violence which, as a result, has caused them mental stress and apprehension regarding the loss of the identity (Safdar & Yasmin, 2020, p.684). In a similar vein, it would be interesting to see how these women, i.e., teachers repositioned their professional identity while keeping up the expectations of traditional familial roles at home. Considering the significance as well as unavailability of literature on this issue, this paper is going to unravel the process of identity renegotiation among female teachers and aspires to contribute to the body of knowledge revealing the impact of COVID on human behaviour and life.

This paper is based on a case study of a public sector high school, and fieldwork of 30-day has been conducted to get an in-depth-insiders' view on the complex nature of the issue that focuses on the notion of adjusting professional identity among school teachers in the traditional environment of the home.

Research Methodology and Methods

Keeping in view the nature of the study, qualitative research methodology was employed; an unfolding, open-ended and rather emerging research with acquired data in the form of words, phrases, and gestures (Neuman, 2009). Working women were considered as the target group of this research as the most suitable and informed respondents; to further find more suitable respondents, female teachers were selected from a public sector school. To actualize this research, a case study of a public school located in Islamabad was conducted. The fieldwork lasted for 30 days. Initial work was informal to gain the trust and general views of teachers on the issue. Later on, official permission for the research was granted to start formal research.

A purposive sampling technique was used to select these respondents, as it facilitated gaining experiential and in-depth insight on the issue at hand. To acquire realistic, authentic and valid data, field research was conducted in a naturalistic setting. The researcher carried out face-to-face, in-depth interviews with 15 female teachers. Senior teachers were selected. On average, an interview lasted for approximately 30-40 minutes and was conducted in the Urdu language to maintain an informal, friendly environment. It simply refers to penning down what you saw, were told or reconstructing a case history of an individual to comprehend various phenomena in more detail (Neuman, 2009). Data were analyzed through Thematic Analysis Technique (TAT) after categorizing them according to the themes. Themes were generated with the help of an extensive literature review. In addition to secondary data, primary data from the field also helped in generating new themes. For the validity of the results, observations, respondents' dialogues and mini-case studies were used. The name of the institution and respondents have been changed to maintain privacy and research ethics.

Field Data and Discussion

Field data clearly revealed that the respondents were aware of their professional identity. Many

respondents share during their interviews. Here few stances are quoted.

A respondent declares that

"Whenever anyone asks me about what my profession is, I feel so proud to tell them that I am a government teacher. It gives me pride that I have a good professional identity in society".

Another respondent reported that

"Teaching is a profession which gives us respect and honour. It gives a sound livelihood too. Primary school teachers are mostly loved by their students and are always regarded, so it is the best way to earn respect and honour. The caring nature of females makes them the best instructors. Teachers are like mothers to their students, and hence it is a great profession".

According to a respondent,

"I always enjoy my professional identity as a teacher. When I started my job, no one in my family supported me, as in my family, no woman ever joined a job. I do it for myself only, and when I got a government job, I saw an amazing change in the reaction of my family. After that, everyone in my family was in support of women joining a profession. My job gives me a professional identity and gives worth to my decisions".

Another respondent shared her views related to the role of professional identity in decision-making. According to her,

"When I was in my college or university life, there was no worth in my decisions. My family members always used to say that I am immature and I don't have any idea of world problems or reality, but when I started my job, they started considering me a valuable member of my family".

One of my respondents shares her pride while sharing the excessive pressures as she has to take responsibility for home and family while doing her job. She highlighted,

"I love my job because its job time is short. You can go for teaching in the morning and return at noon. So this makes it the most suitable job for women to maintain balance in work and family."

The research data has revealed that COVID and related phenomena have drastically

influenced the life of female teachers. According to a respondent,

"I had a great balanced life before COVID-19. Every day I go to school and interact with my students and friends. Most importantly, finish the school work at school and stay relaxed and free at home. But this pandemic played havoc with my life. I am contained at home all the time, doing either house chores or preparing for teaching/teaching. No time left for me. I feel I am living in the stone age."

Another teacher identified that

"During the pandemic, the school was closed partially, and we are to make Whatsapp groups and take classes on it. It was not an easy task to get access to our students as they were from lower middle and lower classes. It was a very tense and stressful time to connect with our students. Once it's done, teaching on the phone becomes a headache."

Talking about the problems of teaching, one teacher states,

"Students were too young to take online classes, so their parents kept a check and balance on social media apps which were used to take online classes."

Highlighting the problems respondents face while teaching from home, a teacher pointed out,

"My husband is very keen and disciplined. I have to do everything on time for him. Meanwhile, doing my domestic work, I have to take classes regularly and also do other tasks for my husband".

Another respondent shared her stress while working from home in the following,

"I have 2 daughters, and my husband passed away, so I have to take care of my daughters alone. My in-laws are also blaming me for my husband's death. That's the reason I am living alone with my daughters. During the Covid-19 lockdown, I have to take classes regularly and also pay attention to my daughters. Care burden was more than my strength".

One of the respondents, during the interview, said that,

'To manage both the responsibilities of school and home is difficult. We are always on duty. So we have to focus on work and family all the time and cannot find time for ourselves.'

The following case can help to see female teachers feel about the impact of COVID and the lockdown on the life of women.

Case 1

Ms Sobia, 35, is a teacher who has ten years of teaching experience. She belongs to a lower middle-class Pakistani family; her husband is an electrician. She has three kids (2 girls and a boy), ages ranging from 10-6 and lives in a joint family with her mother or father-in-law and a younger brother of her husband. They live in a two-room small house in G-9, Islamabad. She manages all the chores with the help of her daughters. Before the lockdown, she completes all the household work early in the morning (including preparing food used for lunch and dinner) as she has to go to school with her daughters. But the lockdown broke down the prevailing system. Now all family members stay in the small house, and there is always some argument going on between her husband and brother-in-law, and her parents-in-law try to resolve the issue.

As she is now working from home to teaching rather than going to school, so everyone gets lazy and creates problems for completing house chores on time. This negatively influences their time management and her mood to start her online classes via WhatsApp. Besides, the voice of the TV in the other room is constantly disturbing the class, and her husband and mother-in-law are approaching her to facilitate them on an urgent basis while she is taking a class on WhatsApp. She gets tired and stressed from this whole unfinished business and loaded environment. Previously, she went to school from 7:30 to 2:30. This time, out of the home gives her a break from all the ongoing arguments, nagging and unease in the house. She really enjoys getting ready for school and interacting with her colleagues and students. With her colleagues, she shares her personal issues and gets relaxed. Being at school means a lot to her;

she feels the life there. She is waiting for two days per week as per her schedule to go to school during the lockdown. She feels upset about herself that she has lost her groomed self and turned into a maid (Maasi) while staying home and dealing with all the mess COVID-19 has created at home.

Field data has also highlighted the prevalence of stress among female teachers as the online classes processes and different giving the least chance of contact among the stakeholders (teacher and student). Respondents share that it generates a sense of isolation for us with the extra pressure of workload and use of phone/net service problems that lead to stress which is in line with existing literature (Chitra, 2020).

One of my respondents said that

"I am an extrovert personality, and I can't stay at home all the time. I love to socialize, but due to this self-isolation and quarantine period, I can't able to go out with my friends and relatives, which makes me stressed."

To further elucidate this phenomenon, a case is presented here.

Case 2

Miss Akhter is one of the senior teachers in school with 15 years of working experience. She is married and has 4 children, 2 boys and 2 girls (one daughter is married). Age ranges from 16-30 and lives in a nuclear family. They are living in a rented house. She belongs to a middle-class Punjabi family. Her husband is a government teacher as well. She manages all her domestic work. Before the lockdown, she managed herself and her family very well. During the lockdown, she and her husband got affected by Covid-19. They informed all their friends and family members not to visit them, but when she recovered from this virus after 15 days, her husband was still in quarantine for the whole month. Her husband had difficulty breathing. Her husband becomes more aggressive during these periods and often remains in a bad mood. After recovering from Covid-19, she got pain in her backbone regularly, but she had to do her house chores

as the maid was also on leaves and her daughter was too young to do the domestic work. By living within a room only, she got depressed and suffocated. During quarantine, her elder daughter, who lives in the same city, cooked food for them and her son brought food home and all other household items.

After getting rid of quarantine, she had to take online classes as well as her household work at the same time, so she got management of time. As her children have their own online classes, so everyone is in their own room. Everyone was busy with mobile phones and laptops. She got her schedule from the principal to visit the school at least one day a week. Going to school one day a week helped her to overcome her depression and anxiety as she was very depressed about her family and managed life.

Case 3

Ms Farhat is another senior teacher. She has been teaching at the institution for 11 years. She is married and has no kids. She is living with her parents at that time. She started her career as a teacher in the junior wing, and now she is a senior teacher. When she started her job, there were no responsibilities on her from her family. She started her job for herself. During Covid-19, her whole family was caught by the Covid-19 virus. Her father's condition became critical. She and her husband have some minor symptoms. Because of their strong stamina, they survive Covid-19, but they have body pain. Her husband brought food from outside. They use disposable plates and glasses for their meal. She used to visit her school two days a week, so she had to do all her household tasks in the morning because the maid was also on leave.

She has to take her online classes and do her domestic work at the same time. There was no one to help her. Even one day, she has to take her online class at 8 PM. She has given most of her time to this school, but she never felt so much stress about my work as she felt in lockdown; she faced different difficulties during these months of lockdown. As it was my first time taking online classes, it is a primary-

level school, so students are very young to take online classes. Her interaction with students was very less. She had to check their work through pictures, and it was very irritating for her to keep checking online homework. She was always managing different jobs at home and even got fed up with her job. She found it extremely difficult to stay motivated to continue teaching if classes will not be turned into at school and face to face.

Conclusion and Implications

The current study is an effort to see the influence of Covid-19 and lockdown on the life of female school teachers. One of the key findings and insights from this research is that the studied female school teachers have gone through a very difficult time as the pandemic has turned their life upside down in both personal and professional domains. The data also points out that the respondents have faced lots of challenges like online education, excessive care and household work, work-family conflict etc., giving way to depression, stress, anxiety, isolation (quarantine) and low self-worth and compromised professional identity. This study adds significantly to the conversation around Covid-19 and the professional identities of female school teachers. With the use of qualitative research, in-depth and experiential data is gathered, and analysis-based valid results are produced. It is a complete model, and the findings are reliable, practical, and supported by the available research. There are still certain limitations, though. First and foremost, only one public sector organization in Islamabad was studied for the research; anyhow, generalization is always a possibility. Second, because only working women were included in the study, the findings do not apply to all readers. Despite these two issues, this research is extremely important given the lack of published research and materials on the subject at hand. The study also opens up several new directions for further investigation. In the future, research can take organizations both from the public and private sectors with a more holistic research framework, i.e., triangulation, to contribute to knowledge on the issue at hand.

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