# Conducting Qualitative Interviews Online and In-person: Issues of Rapport Building and Trust

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## Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the dynamics of social research and posed various challenges for researchers working in the field. Studies have highlighted different methodological challenges posed by the pandemic; in particular, issues of trust and rapport building with participants in online and in-person interviews require further exploration. Very few studies are available on these aspects from the socio-cultural context of low-income countries, where issues of trust, rapport building and internet connectivity further complicate matters. To address this gap, I reflect upon my experiences from my doctoral fieldwork on "Gender arrangements and subjective experiences of female breadwinning couples (FBCs) in Pakistan". The pandemic hindered my access to research participants and the research locality, necessitating a switch to online interviewing. I conducted 15 interviews offline before the pandemic and 12 interviews online during the pandemic. My reflexive account demonstrates how trust and rapport building with participants in online (via Zoom and WhatsApp) and in-person interviews are linked with the issues of researcher positionality, internet connectivity, gathering of rich data, nature of the research topic, and larger cultural and structural barriers. My fieldwork experiences show that online tools do not necessarily flatten existing power hierarchies and patriarchal challenges; instead, they introduce new layers of complexities and can exacerbate existing social barriers. The experiences discussed in this paper produce multiple insights, including the challenges of conducting interviews in both private and public spaces, the complex role of researcher positionality, nuanced ways in which gender norms shape participants' willingness to participate in a research study, and the limitations of online interviewing in cultural contexts like Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistan, researcher positionality, online interviewing, qualitative methods, rapport, trust, gender, fieldwork

The rise of technology has broadened the avenues available for interview-based research. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, drove a shift towards online interviewing (Self 2021). Recent trends show a growing preference for online data collection methods due to their assumed ability to obtain a varied sample and because they offer flexibility to participants. Specifically, the integration

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of online video tools such as Google Hangouts, Skype, and FaceTime has been particularly useful for qualitative researchers. These platforms help overcome certain difficulties associated with face-to-face interviews (Seitz 2016). Nonetheless, some experts maintain that traditional in-person interviews set the benchmark due to their effectiveness in establishing rapport and trust (Adams-Hutcheson / Longhurst 2017, Hanna 2012). Online methods, although convenient, can present challenges, especially in terms of building rapport within certain cultural settings (Oates 2015). The absence of physical presence and nonverbal cues in online interactions can hinder the trust and rapport-building process (Deakin / Wakefield 2014). Moreover, even if online interviews can create emotional connections, they might also pave the way for undue revelations or false rapport (Weller 2017). Seitz (2016) further notes that online interview platforms like Skype may not be well suited for sensitive topics, calling for future research to compare the effectiveness of in-person interviews to those conducted via Skype.

The present study contributes to the growing body of literature that examines the use of both online and in-person modes of interviewing in the pre-and post-COVID-19 research landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic prompted researchers worldwide to adopt online methods. The literature on the debates surrounding the mode of interviewing and how it shapes the trust and rapport-building process is predominantly situated in Global North contexts (Johnson et al. 2019, Lawrence 2022), while cultural contexts like Pakistan have received limited attention (Hall et al. 2021). This study endeavours to investigate the comparability of the data and information derived from face-to-face and online interviews in Pakistan, as well as the dynamics that transpire with regard to trust, intimacy, and rapport building with research participants in these distinct interview contexts. The study adopts a reflexive approach and addresses the question: How do online and face-to-face interview situations engender different dynamics for issues related to trust and rapport building with research participants? By utilising notes from a reflexive diary, this study uses experiences with online and in-person interviews to compare trust, rapport, and the quality of information in both settings. The interviews were conducted for my PhD research, which aimed to analyse the gender arrangements and subjective experiences of female breadwinning couples (FBCs) in Pakistan. Specifically, the focus was on Islamabad and its peripheral areas. Data collection spanned from 2019 to 2022, which means that it encompassed various phases: beginning in the pre-pandemic era, continuing through the pandemic, and extending into the post-pandemic times.

The methodological foundation of my research was a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2016). This approach inherently emphasises a continuous, iterative process where data collection and analysis occur simultaneously, requiring constant comparative analysis. The nature of this approach meant

that as themes and patterns emerged, I would go back and forth, entering the field multiple times to refine and validate the data and deepen my understanding. The data collected for this study, specifically in the context of Pakistan, highlights some of the challenges and barriers encountered in in-person and online interviewing, such as the difficulty in establishing trust and rapport with research participants, the struggle to hold an interview in private, the lack of access to a stable internet connection and the digital divide. The findings of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the limitations and considerations of utilising online and in-person modes of interviewing in research, especially in cultural contexts like Pakistan.

The following section delves into the existing literature, which focuses on various nuances of trust and rapport building across online and in-person interviewing. It also discusses varying perspectives on the advantages and drawbacks of these interviewing methods, particularly with regard to gender dynamics in establishing rapport and trust with study participants. Subsequently, I will outline my fieldwork, specify the core project underpinning this paper, and delineate the methodology adopted. I will then explore the challenges faced during in-person interviews, as well as how this mode of interviewing offered avenues to foster rapport and secure participants' trust. This will be succeeded by an analysis of the challenges I confronted in the online interviews and my strategies for navigating them. In the final section, I will conclude by underscoring the contributions and implications of this paper.

## Literature review

Trust and rapport between the interviewer and the participant are critical in qualitative research for obtaining in-depth and reliable data, as well as for fostering an environment where the interviewee is willing to engage openly with the researcher (Prior 2018). Both trust and rapport are particularly significant for studies that delve into sensitive research topics and for investigative interviews, for which researchers have identified several strategies and techniques for rapport-building, including methods such as nonverbal mimicry and self-disclosure, to increase trust and cooperation (Abbe / Brandon 2014). These strategies are not only applicable in investigative research settings but can also enhance rapport in various qualitative research contexts. Researchers have further emphasised that verbal strategies such as small talk and discussing common interests also play a key role in creating a comfortable atmosphere, which in turn encourages interviewees to provide more detailed and accurate information (Vallano et al. 2015). However, while rapport generally enhances the quality of data, it can also lead to bias, and high levels of rapport might encourage

participants to give socially desirable responses rather than honest answers, particularly in interviews that address sensitive topics (Horsfall et al. 2021). Researchers may also feel pressured to align their views with those of their participants to maintain rapport, potentially distorting the authenticity of the data collected (Thwaites 2017).

Dundon and Ryan (2008) examined how researchers faced difficulties in building rapport with trade union leaders, who were initially suspicious of the research process but whose concerns were allayed through the transparency and consistency of the researchers, thereby allowing interviewees to feel secure in sharing their thoughts. Moreover, the location and context of an interview can greatly impact the trust and rapport-building process as well as the results, as noted by several qualitative research studies (e.g., Gubrium et al. 2012, Kvale / Brinkmann 2008). Previously, telephone interviews were often used to reach participants who were geographically distant, had mobility issues or concerns about privacy, or had busy schedules (Nandi / Platt 2017, Sturges / Hanrahan 2004). With increasing access to digital communication technology, some researchers are now advocating for more research via synchronous online platforms such as Skype, Zoom and WhatsApp as they may be more comfortable for both participants and researchers (Stephens 2007, Seitz 2016).

Although many qualitative researchers have found video chat platforms to be useful, there have been concerns about their effectiveness during online interviews. Researchers from social science methodologies, such as O'Connor et al. (2008) and Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst (2017), have identified challenges with synchronous online interviewing, such as issues with interview design, difficulty building rapport in a virtual setting, technical difficulties, lack of nonverbal cues and certain ethical challenges. While some of these challenges, such as technical difficulties, can be mitigated through planning and preparation, others, such as building rapport and intimacy, are more difficult to overcome. Seitz (2016) notes that while interviews via video chat platforms offer comfort and convenience, they also have limitations in terms of nonverbal cues, trust and rapport when compared to in-person interviews. Similarly, Adams-Hutcheson and Longhurst (2017) argue that the lack of a shared environment and the sense of distance create feelings of disconnection that reduce sensitivity and intimacy when interviews take place online. On the other hand, Park (2023) has examined rapport building in online qualitative interviews, particularly through the use of emoticons in feminist research, where their study revealed that non-traditional tools like emoticons can enhance rapport by enabling nonverbal communication in a digital environment, which is often limited in its ability to convey empathy and warmth. In addition, Weller (2017) argues that physical separation can instead increase rapport, which could lead to interviewees sharing more than they would in an in-person interview setting. Nevertheless, Weller also notes that due to technical difficulties and call interruptions, on-

line interviews can result in disruptions of flow that can damage rapport and data quality.

The gender positionality of the researcher and participant also plays a key role in shaping online and in-person fieldwork experiences (Arendell 1997). Feminist researchers have long argued that the ethnicity, gender and socio-economic status of a researcher impact the outcome of their research and relationship with the participants (Gilbert 2015, Suen et al. 2020, Oakley 2016). It is argued that due to distinct positionalities and varying life experiences men and women experience fieldwork in different ways (LaRocco et al. 2020). Consequently, shared gender identities between participant and researcher can facilitate rapport and the trust-building process during qualitative fieldwork. The impact of researchers' gender identity appears more pronounced in studies conducted in patriarchal and hyper-masculine cultural contexts. For instance, a study conducted with male security officers in Canada illustrates how recognising shared experiences of hardships and a common gender identity between the researcher and the participants prompted empathy, a revaluation of gendered beliefs and open interview conversation (Johnston 2019). On the other hand, data also shows that cross-gender interviews might pose various difficulties and intricacies (Sowatey et al. 2021). Nonetheless, cross-gender interviews may produce insights that may be overlooked in interviews conducted in same-gender interview situations (Falen 2008, Rodrguez-Dorans 2018). These issues necessitate careful consideration to ensure that the relationship between participants and the researcher is both trusting and neutral enough to avoid skewed results.

The literature discussed here highlights the importance of exploring issues of trust and rapport building in online and in-person interviewing (Seitz 2016, Nandi / Platt 2017). However, despite the increasing use of online platforms and means of communication for qualitative interviews, this issue is often neglected in the broader methodological literature, particularly in contexts where gender, culture and power dynamics play significant roles, such as in Pakistan. Similarly, most existing research emphasises practical concerns like cost, convenience, scheduling and the logistical differences between online and in-person interviews, and these discussions fail to explore the deeper relational aspects of conducting interviews (Park 2024, Prior 2018, Oates 2015). This paper contributes to the literature on issues of trust and rapport building across online and in-person qualitative interviewing and it also highlights how the researcher's positionality can affect fieldwork across online and in-person mediums.

## Methodology

This article is a reflexive account of my doctoral project, which was designed and initiated in 2019 before the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, yet continued during the pandemic. My doctoral study explores the gender arrangements and subjective experiences of female breadwinner couples (FBC) in Pakistan. The purpose of the study was to explore how transitioning to non-normative work-family roles is experienced and negotiated among couples where the wife is the breadwinner. An increase in the ratio of women's education, their employment opportunities in the labour market, rising unemployment among men and transformations in the family structure have resulted in the entry of more women into breadwinning roles. However, this transition towards gender non-normative arrangements has not been explored sufficiently in cultural contexts like Pakistan. Given the country's highly patriarchal cultural context, its prioritised gendered division of responsibilities and its institutional context lacking welfare state provisions or support systems such as unemployment insurance, Pakistan provides a unique context for researching these transitions (Majid / Siegmann 2021, Shah 2023).

Therefore, in my doctoral thesis, I analyse the different dimensions of men's and women's transitions towards non-normative family/work and carer/breadwinner arrangements. By focusing on the experiences, practices and coping strategies of female breadwinners and their male partners, especially in the face of stigmatisation, I highlight different aspects of "doing transitions" and the way in which individual experiences are shaped by specific social situations, cultural discourses and institutional regulations.

I anticipated certain obstacles in recruiting participants for my PhD research, including difficulties in accessing individuals with busy work schedules and lower levels of education in rural areas. However, when I began the process of recruiting prospective participants, I soon realised that the task would prove to be more challenging than I had initially anticipated. I encountered a multitude of obstacles through the course of my study, including difficulty in accessing potential participants, gaining their trust and building rapport with them. These challenges were further complicated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's participants encompassed 20 female breadwinner couples from both the urban core and rural outskirts of Islamabad, Pakistan. I employed the snowball sampling technique to select this sample. Conducted in Urdu, the interviews were open-ended, creating a space for participants to share their experiences openly. While guided by a semi-structured format, these interview sessions with the participants spanned 60–90 minutes each.

I conducted this study utilising the constructivist grounded theory method. This approach underscores the researcher's active role in interpreting and com-

prehending the data. This method proves especially insightful for delving into sensitive and complex topics like gender dynamics and individual experiences, as it facilitates an in-depth understanding of participants' viewpoints and experiences (Charmaz 2016). For this purpose, I conducted interviews with men and women who are part of a couple where the woman is the breadwinner. I initiated my fieldwork in September 2019, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, my intention was to conduct joint interviews with both partners. However, a recurrent observation during these sessions was the dominant participation of the male partners. They frequently overshadowed their female counterparts, often limiting them to yes-or-no responses and, in doing so, inhibited the female partner's expression of her own experiences. This dynamic led to the collection of data that I did not consider sufficiently reliable.

I was hoping to capture detailed and nuanced responses of the participants to my interview questions regarding their personal experiences, emotions and contexts. My purpose was to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the FBC's experiences, and the collection of rich interview data included not only factual responses but also the meanings, interpretations and feelings participants attach to their experiences. Therefore, I considered a successful interview one in which participants freely discussed their experiences, emotions and challenges related to the female breadwinner arrangement and provided in-depth and detailed responses to my questions. On the other hand, I considered as a failed or unsatisfactory interview one that was characterised by superficial answers and mostly yes/no responses to my interview questions or, in some cases, one that came to an abrupt end, leaving the interview incomplete.

Based on these initial experiences and to foster an environment where female participants could speak more freely, I pivoted my strategy. I began interviewing the female participants at their respective workspaces (where their husbands were generally not present), a decision that proved fruitful, as these settings facilitated more open dialogues, yielding richer data. Yet the unforeseen outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, followed by workspace closures and travel and movement restrictions, posed another set of challenges, rendering in-person fieldwork nearly impossible, as I have described elsewhere (Shah in Batool et al. 2022: 445–451). This external circumstance necessitated another shift in my methodology. The move to online platforms for interviews, such as Zoom and WhatsApp, became a circumstantial response to the pandemic restrictions, rather than an initial design choice. In addition, I was forced to rely on online mediums of communication for interviews in a region with limited internet connectivity. I will discuss challenges concerning online interviewing in more detail below.

Other key challenges were related to the nature of my research topic and my positionality. In the cultural context of Pakistan, my position as a male researcher conducting gender research presented unique challenges. When I com-

menced my fieldwork in 2019, before the pandemic, I had initially envisioned conducting the study through in-person interviews, anticipating straightforward access to participants. On several occasions during the course of my fieldwork and efforts to reach potential participants, I was confronted by the view that such topics are more suited for female researchers, and that I should instead be doing "real research". Responses like these are grounded in traditional notions of gendered roles wherein men are primary decision-makers and breadwinners while women are expected to manage household affairs, along with the segregation of occupations in the cultural context (Khan et al. 2023). These challenges and overall scepticism were exacerbated by a general undervaluation of research and shortages of funding for research-related endeavours in Pakistan.

In the face of all these challenges, I remained committed, making various efforts and adopting strategies to reach potential participants. However, most of the participants, especially the men, feared societal judgement and avoided participation in the study. One particular potential male participant, part of a female breadwinning arrangement for over a decade, hesitated despite my continuous trust-building efforts. He was apprehensive about societal labels of being "unmanly" or "weak" and the potential damage to his reputation that an interview with me could cause. He therefore refused to participate in the study. I understood his concerns and respected his decision. However, this experience made me realise the sensitivity of the topic and the importance of approaching it with understanding and empathy. It also highlighted the importance of building rapport and trust with participants and being sensitive to their concerns and feelings. Below, I discuss the impediments I faced whilst conducting online and in-person interviews, alongside the potential benefits afforded by each method. I commence by delving into my experiences with in-person interviewing.

## Navigating trust and rapport building in in-person interviewing

Building rapport and trust with participants is a crucial aspect of recruiting participants for a research study; however, as described above, establishing a conducive environment of trust and rapport for the interviews was particularly challenging in the context of my study, in both online and in-person interviewing. I observed from my fieldwork that a major factor hindering researchers from establishing the necessary level of trust and rapport for obtaining in-depth information from participants is the prevalent lack of a research culture in Pakistan and low level of awareness of such studies among the general public.

I had to confront scepticism about my authenticity as a researcher when participants were often suspicious of my motives and unsure why they were being approached for an interview, and this situation made it difficult to establish

meaningful connections and trust (Mockler 2011). As I found in my personal experiences of working on various research projects in Pakistan, researchers from the social sciences are often suspected of being associated with some NGO, concealing a suspicious agenda, working as a journalist or maybe undercover for a secret spy agency (Shah 2023, 2024a). This distrust can be traced back to a history of exploitation by outside groups, and as a result, participants may be wary of outsiders coming in to collect information without seeing any tangible benefits from this process (Zaidi 2002). Moreover, these suspicions have also historical and contextual reasons due to long periods of war and conflict in Pakistan (Kukreja 2020, Zaidi 2002).

The nature of the research topic and my positionality as a young, male researcher also presented significant challenges in building trust and rapport with participants in my in-person interviews. Existing studies show that when exploring sensitive topics such as gender, sexuality or mental health, participants may be reluctant to discuss these topics in a conservative cultural context where these issues are often stigmatised (Bryman 2016, Sandelowski 2002). FBCs are a stigmatised group in Pakistan and therefore couples were particularly hesitant to talk about their experiences.

These dynamics influenced the level of access and trust I could build with participants, especially with female participants, particularly in private spaces such as their homes, because they were often reluctant to engage openly in conversation with me. This was in contradiction with one of my initial assumptions that conducting interviews in a private space (such as the home) would be more conducive to gathering rich, detailed data. However, I found that the presence of other family members, particularly male figures, limited the openness with which female participants could share their experiences. They seemed to feel surveilled by family members, which curtailed their ability to speak freely and thus prevented rapport building. This shows that researchers should be highly attuned to the context of private spaces, as these can present additional challenges in terms of openness and rapport building.

The presence of family members, neighbours, colleagues or other people from the community was a major factor that affected my interviews, even if these interviews were conducted in seemingly "private" spaces of the home or office. For instance, I was interviewing a female participant in her office (this was a small room with a capacity of not more than three to four people), and within the span of an hour, four different co-workers who were oblivious to the ongoing interview entered the room unannounced and engaged in casual conversation, discussing personal and political topics without consideration for the interview. This was a frustrating situation not only for me but also for the participant and I tried repeatedly to explain my presence and the purpose of the interview, but most of the co-workers were more interested in continuing their discussions. Out of respect for my participant and her co-workers, I tried

to halt the conversation momentarily, but the continual disturbances prevented her from concentrating and proceeding with the interview. These constant interruptions during our interview intensified the interviewee's discomfort and after an hour she excused, herself stating that she could not continue the interview any further because she had to reach her home on time.

Similarly, during my interviews in rural areas, it was common to experience unexpected interruptions. In most cases the participant's neighbours or someone from the extended family entered the room uninvited, catching both of us off guard and, driven by curiosity, began enquiring about our discussion, disrupting our interview rhythm. I always attempted to courteously address questions without breaking the conversation's momentum, yet it was difficult to maintain focus as the interlopers would not exit the interview situation and it was culturally inappropriate to ask them to leave. This situation seemed mostly frustrating for my participants who, in these few cases, were willing to share their stories and experiences, but were reluctant to do so in the presence of other people.

These experiences of interruptions from participants' social environment during interviews, their general scepticism towards the topic and the interview setting, along with the presence of patriarchal norms, highlight broader social patterns. This raised several reflections on my part where I felt that approaching participants for an interview on this sensitive topic was an interruption in their routines. I felt that the interview itself was like an intrusion into participants' daily lives because it made some of them feel uncomfortable, given that the interview drew attention to their non-normative labour arrangement, which is a strongly stigmatised identity in the Pakistani cultural context (Shah 2023). Such an intrusion requires reflexivity on the part of the researcher, as we must recognise the complex social rhythms participants navigate while participating in interviews. Similarly, the disruptions during in-person interviews in private spaces, such as homes or small offices, emphasise the need for flexible interviewing techniques that acknowledge the social dynamics in these settings (Seitz 2016). For instance, the consistent interruptions from family members and colleagues during interviews highlight how researchers must expect and adapt to these external influences, and this also requires methodological adaptability and resilience on the part of researchers (Suadik 2022). Therefore, in my study context, instead of viewing these interruptions as only hindrances, I reflect on how they shaped my data collection process, pointing to the significance of shared social spaces in influencing participants' openness and engagement.

In addition, I also want to acknowledge that overcoming these challenges requires taking a culturally sensitive and empathetic approach, developing clear and concise explanations of the research methods and objectives (ibid.). I realised in this process that by being flexible, proactive and responsive to the needs of participants, I can build rapport, achieve the trust of the participants and

improve the quality and reliability of the data collected during my in-person interviews (Bryman 2016).

## Online interviewing:
## Amplifying the existing challenges of trust and rapport

Online interviews offer various advantages, including convenience, saving time and the possibility of conducting these interviews from a space of comfort (Weller 2017). A key advantage of online interviewing is, as some argue, the balanced power dynamics it establishes between the interviewee and the researcher (Seitz 2016). In-person interviews can sometimes manifest power disparities, with the researcher seemingly holding more authority, potentially influencing the participant to answer in a particular manner (Rolland et al. 2020). For instance, during some of my online interviews, participants abruptly ended the interviews, citing family obligations or the sudden arrival of a male family member at home as the reason. During in-person interviews conducted at workplaces, such disruptions were absent (although colleagues also interrupted, the dynamics of such disturbances were different) and almost all participants completed the interviews without such abrupt termination.

The option of being able to leave the interview at any moment highlights that participants gain some degree of freedom and empowerment during online interviews, and this seemed to result in a more genuine interaction, yet there were moments of frustration for me as a researcher when participants suddenly terminated online sessions without warning or prior notice, resulting in incomplete interviews. These results corroborate the observations made by Khan (2022) regarding the efficacy of utilising voice-only interviews for engaging with hard-to-reach participants and the consequent enhancement of the interviewee's agency within the researcher-participant dynamic. Furthermore, the online format was found to be more suitable for educated participants, who were more proficient and comfortable with smartphones and online calling applications, compared to less educated participants who lacked these skills.

However, the challenges of establishing rapport and gaining the trust of my participants for data collection increased substantially when I attempted to conduct online interviews. As mentioned above, I started collecting interview data before the pandemic but switched to online mediums (Zoom and WhatsApp voice calls) when the COVID-19 pandemic began and physical movement was restricted. For most of these interviews, the participants were in their homes. One major challenge was accessing and convincing participants to take part in an online interview. I resorted to posting on social media sites like Facebook and LinkedIn to find volunteers and I relied on personal contacts.

The challenges continued during the data collection: many female participants, in particular, were hesitant to share their contact information (specifically their phone number) with a male researcher – something that was necessary for a WhatsApp or voice call interview. This reluctance reflects deeper cultural norms where the sharing of personal information with a stranger, especially a man, is considered inappropriate or risky. Moreover, they were mostly unfamiliar with the Zoom app, which would have allowed them greater privacy. Male participants also showed reluctance to participate in online interviews and most participants turned out to be the female partners. It is interesting to note that educated and urban participants mostly opted for Zoom calls while the less educated participants and those from rural areas tended to prefer WhatsApp voice calls. Hence, when conducting online interviews, the participants' familiarity with online communication apps and services is an important factor to consider.

Research shows that gathering rich data through online interviews can be challenging due to internet connectivity issues, which can impact the quality and validity of the data collected (Adams-Hutcheson / Longhurst 2017). I encountered several difficulties in this regard during my online interview attempts, including interruptions to the internet connection, slow speed that caused distortions and, in some cases, participants abruptly ending the interview. In most of these cases, participants struggled to reflect on their answers due to the fast-paced nature of online interviews and the unstable internet connection: participants were more preoccupied with technological issues, which diverted attention from the interview content, meaning that the technology itself became an obstacle. This led to incomplete responses with a lack of depth and detail.

Reflecting on an interview after it has been conducted is beneficial for gaining richer data in qualitative research (Dempsey et al. 2016). It allows the interviewee to think about their own experiences, thoughts and emotions during the interview and to clarify their responses and provide additional insights (Seidman 2006). This process also helps the interviewee to identify areas where they may have been unclear, where they could have provided more detailed responses, or where they could have better articulated their perspectives and experiences (ibid.). When interviewees get the opportunity to reflect on the interview this can also help to build rapport with the researcher, as the interviewee may feel heard and understood, and may be more likely to participate in future research studies (Bryman 2016). However, post-interview chats were not possible during my online interview attempts because the interviews mostly ended abruptly.

Furthermore, conducting online interviews with female participants in my research context raised concerns about the presence of third parties: "Who is around?" and "Who is listening?" These concerns were particularly relevant in a cultural context where there is sensitivity surrounding issues of the female

voice and recordings, which are connected to notions of privacy (Ibtasam et al. 2019). These sensitivities are connected to the concept of *ghairat*, or honour, in Pakistani culture (Naseer 2019). In some cases, even though assurances of confidentiality were given, female participants explicitly conveyed their hesitancy to participate in online interviews or speak openly due to concerns about how their responses might be perceived by others and the fear that they would bring shame to themselves or their families. This highlights the complex ways in which the participants' voices carry symbolic weight in patriarchal settings (ibid.).

While negotiating an interview with one prospective male participant, he agreed to a one-to-one interview with himself but declined for his female partner to be interviewed. When I asked for the reasons, he stated that women's voices should not be heard by men outside of their immediate family. I told the participant that a female researcher could conduct the interview if my interaction with his partner was not acceptable. However, he rejected this option as well and maintained that he was ready to be interviewed, but his partner would not be able to speak to me or to a female interviewer. This example implies that certain justifications, like the disapproval and/or fear of recordings, might simply be fabricated excuses that mask larger patriarchal dynamics.

Another issue is related to the presence of other people and the fear on the part of female participants of being overheard by members of their family (since most of them were in their private homes when the interviews took place). In some conservative or traditional households, there is strict gender segregation, and women may only be allowed to speak with men who are immediate family members or who have a specific purpose, such as being a doctor or teacher (Asif 2010). It is important to mention here that these women may engage with male colleagues in their professional environments; the home as a private and family-regulated space is governed by different social norms, where informal or unsupervised conversations with unrelated men can be viewed as socially inappropriate. In such cases, a female participant may be hesitant to speak openly during an online interview if a male family member or acquaintance is present in the room (Ibtasam et al. 2019).

This can be further complicated if the interviewer is also male (as in my case), as the participant may feel uncomfortable speaking with a man who is not a family member (Shah 2024a). In this specific context, I found female participants hesitant to speak openly during our online interviews due to the fear that a male family member or acquaintance might overhear the conversation. This aspect was compounded by concerns surrounding the audio recording of the interviews and its potential misuse or distribution. Even though I ensured participants that their data would not be recorded or misused, most of the female participants remained uneasy with the notion, making them hesitant to partake in an online interview (Ibtasam et al. 2019). It seemed that women felt more

in control when interviews were conducted in person and at the workplace, while they feared secret recording when interviews took place online.

I had expected that online spaces might mitigate the patriarchal constraints associated with face-to-face interviews by providing a degree of anonymity and distance for the participants (Zhao / Lim 2021). However, as demonstrated above, this assumption did not hold true. Concerns about online interviews were especially pronounced for women. These insights also reveal that online methods are not inherently advantageous in sensitive research settings and while they may seem to offer anonymity and reduce the physical presence of patriarchal structures, they can exacerbate existing social barriers in cultural contexts like Pakistan. When patriarchal norms are deeply ingrained, even the mediated distance of online communication tools cannot easily flatten these hierarchies.

In response to these challenges, I excluded interviews from the data analysis that faced issues such as poor call quality, abrupt termination or insufficient time for reflection. Lastly, the matter of consent and recording was a sensitive issue for participants, underscoring the importance of safeguarding their privacy, which also became paramount for me. This is why I sought to maintain transparency regarding data collection and storage procedures, and I ensured participants' understanding and consent for recording (Bryman 2016). Building trust with participants and creating a sense of security and comfort during the interviews were essential steps (Deakin / Wakefield 2014), which I tried my best to undertake during my online interview attempts.

## From rapport to rich data:
## How in-person interviewing worked for me

During my fieldwork, I found that in-person interviewing offered more opportunities to establish trust and build rapport with my participants compared to online interviews. Despite the myriad challenges, in-person interviewing presented various advantages, especially when delving into intricate subjects like gender dynamics and the experiences of FBCs in Pakistan (Shah 2024b). For instance, direct engagement through in-person interviewing allowed me to establish a more personal connection and also made participants feel more at ease when sharing their stories and experiences (Seitz 2016).

This was evident during an in-person interview in a village with a male participant where we initiated a casual conversation before delving into the main topics of the interview. This informal conversation set a congenial tone and made the interview environment more relaxed. Such a start made it easier for the participant to discuss and share his experiences in a freer and more open manner. Observing his nonverbal cues during the conversation afforded

deeper insights (Kvale / Brinkmann 2008). At one point, as he recounted a particularly distressing event, his fidgeting and downward gaze revealed his reluctance and unease about broaching that topic. Despite this discomfort, to me, the interview was a success because the interviewee not only shared his experiences but also linked me with another couple in his neighbourhood with a female breadwinning arrangement. This referral indicated that he trusted me, at least to a certain degree.

Another advantage of in-person interviews was the opportunity they provided for informal post-interview chats and extended reflection. After the interviews I was often able to continue conversing with participants, exploring particular topics in greater depth. Such an opportunity for informal discussion and reflection on the interview was not possible in an online context, mainly due to technological glitches, time restrictions and abrupt endings. These in-person post-interview reflections and discussions were crucial for introspection, clarification and pursuing further queries. The additional dialogue often revealed fresh viewpoints or details not broached during the formal interview situation, enriching the breadth and depth of insights obtained from the participants (Swain / King 2022).

A further notable example occurred during a face-to-face interview with a female participant. She shared her thoughts on the societal norms and pressures associated with her gender-non-normative breadwinning role for her family. During the formal interview, I noticed that she was largely reserved and mostly responded with simple affirmatives or negatives to my questions. However, the casual chat that followed the interview yielded in-depth details and stories that were highly pertinent to my study and, recognising the value of her revelations, I sought her permission to incorporate these responses into my research, to which she agreed. She also conveyed a deep sense of relief, valuing the opportunity to discuss her feelings about her role as the main earner and the societal reactions evoked by their unconventional work-family setup. These observations were valuable and made a significant contribution to the development of a more nuanced and thorough understanding of the subjective experiences of the participants.

Moreover, the in-person interviews resulted in fewer abrupt endings than online interviews and participants were more likely to stay engaged in the interview and complete it, with only a few failed interview attempts. This resulted in a more rigorous and precise data-gathering process. One reason for this might be that during in-person interviews, participants may feel a sense of obligation to remain until the end of the session because they are physically present in the same room as the researcher (Dempsey et al. 2016). Additionally, in-person interviews often have a set schedule, making it easier for the researcher to keep track of time and maintain control over the interview process. In contrast, online interviews often experienced technical difficulties or the abrupt

departure of the participants, who sometimes simply disconnected without notifying the researcher, which was not only disruptive to the research process but also frustrating. This could be an indicator that during online interviews, interviewees gain more power in the research process (Khan 2022). However, in my research context, it seems that it was not primarily a question of power but rather unforeseen circumstances that caused abrupt disconnection, such as an unstable internet connection, the sudden arrival of a family member, a request to perform a household task, the need to take care of a crying baby or a reluctance to speak to the researcher in the presence of someone in the room.

In conclusion, while in-person interviewing presents its own challenges, such as scheduling difficulties and potential biases, the advantages it offers make it a valuable technique for exploring a complex topic like the experiences of female breadwinning couples. Building rapport with the participant was easier in an in-person setting, allowing for more personal and in-depth conversations. Additionally, the informal conversations that took place after the formal interviews allowed me to reflect on the discussion and gather deeper insights into the participants' experiences.

## Discussion and conclusion

The issues I encountered in both online and in-person interviews offer broader insights into the challenges of building trust and rapport in qualitative research in sensitive and volatile contexts, particularly in patriarchal societies like Pakistan. Firstly, consideration of the interplay between researcher positionality and access to potential participants is crucial (Berger 2013, Johnston 2019). For instance, various facets of my positionality – such as being a young, unmarried male researcher studying female breadwinning arrangements in Pakistan and my dual identity as both an insider (due to shared cultural and linguistic backgrounds) and outsider (due to my affiliation with a Western academic institution) – complicated the rapport and trust building process and my access to potential participants. My access to both male and female participants was constrained because of dominant socio-cultural norms. Researchers working in similar contexts should be aware that even shared cultural identity may not be enough to overcome the barriers posed by gendered expectations and prevalent patriarchal structures, especially when discussing sensitive topics like gender roles. In fact, an insider status might come with expectations from participants and society that implicit socio-cultural norms should not and cannot be crossed, while outsiders might be afforded more leniency in this regard.

Another key insight this study adds to the discussion regards the assumptions surrounding the interview environment and its link with issues of trust

and rapport building. A key initial assumption that I held was that conducting interviews in a private space (such as the home) would be more conducive to gathering rich, detailed data. However, I found that this was not the case. The presence of other family members, particularly male figures, limited the openness with which participants, especially women, could share their experiences. This challenge is common in patriarchal societies, where private spaces are not necessarily spaces of privacy for women, but rather spaces governed by family dynamics and gendered power hierarchies (Morris 2009). During my attempts to interview both partners in FBCs in their homes, I felt that male partners dominated most of the interview and the female partners felt surveilled by their husband and other family members, curtailing their ability to speak freely. Therefore, the home, instead of being a safe private space for an interview, turned out to be a space that was difficult to navigate for conducting in-depth interviews. This suggests that researchers must be highly attuned to the context of private spaces, as they can present additional challenges in terms of openness and rapport-building, especially when working on gender-sensitive topics in highly patriarchal cultural contexts like Pakistan.

My data collection process was further complicated by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the switch to online modes of interviewing. I had assumed, as also reflected in existing literature, that online spaces might mitigate the patriarchal constraints associated with face-to-face interviews by providing a degree of anonymity and distance (Park 2024, Zhao / Lim 2021). However, my fieldwork experiences showed that online tools do not necessarily flatten or reduce existing power hierarchies and patriarchal challenges, but instead introduce new layers of complexities and can exacerbate existing social barriers.

In addition, the technology itself became an obstacle and a source of risk, particularly in terms of participants' reluctance to share their contact information, such as their WhatsApp numbers, with a male researcher and, in the case of female interviewees, the fear of being recorded or their voices being overheard by a male family member (Ibtasam et al. 2019). Thus, even if one addresses issues of call quality, connectivity and trust, reassuring participants that they are not being recorded, these measures alone are insufficient to create an environment where women feel completely secure and free to speak. This shows the extent to which deeply entrenched cultural norms can exert control over virtual spaces and also reflects broader issues related to the fear of surveillance and distrust of digital platforms in patriarchal societies, where privacy concerns are heightened, especially for women (Bali et al. 2021, Wang / Yuan 2023).

In addition, online interviews in such contexts are further complicated by structural factors such as poor internet connectivity and limited access to technology (Seitz 2016). Researchers planning to use online methods in similar contexts should therefore not assume that these platforms will automatically

facilitate more open and candid responses. Drawing from the literature on digital-world phenomena, as well as from my observations, it is clear that while digital spaces can provide some level of anonymity, they also replicate and sometimes intensify the structural and cultural barriers that exist in physical spaces (Heim 2019, Madianou 2012). For instance, the work of Madianou (2012) on the digital mediation of relationships shows that rather than creating entirely new spaces for interaction, digital platforms often reinforce existing social hierarchies and inequalities. Strategies proposed in previous studies (e.g., Seitz 2016, Deakin / Wakefield 2014) to mitigate the challenges associated with online interviewing, including identifying a disturbance-free environment for both the interviewer and interviewee, ensuring a reliable internet connection, moderating the pace of conversation, attending to non-verbal cues and remaining receptive to rephrasing questions and responses, proved insufficient in addressing the issues encountered in my research context.

My findings align with Holz and Bano's (2022) observations, which draw upon their fieldwork experiences as female researchers in patriarchal and volatile contexts to highlight the persistent challenge of negotiating between their identities as female researchers and "respectable" women in order to establish rapport with their participants. Their gender identity was a critical factor in shaping their experiences in a patriarchal context, Pakistan, where they were often compelled to conform to patriarchal gender norms, but sometimes found themselves intentionally or unintentionally subverting these norms. Similarly, I was constrained by gender-related and patriarchal norms during in-person as well as online interviews.

Moreover, the insights drawn from my study – where participants, especially female participants, were noticeably more open and forthcoming in public spaces such as their workplaces instead of their homes – also hold broader significance. The physical distance from their homes and male family members allowed them to speak more freely, share more detailed narratives and engage more deeply in conversations about their breadwinning roles (Naseer 2019). This suggests that public spaces, which may be seen as less constrained by familial expectations, can provide an important site for collecting rich qualitative data in gender-sensitive research (Casey et al. 2008, Heim 2019). Even though there might also be interruptions in such spaces, they appeared more manageable in my study than those posed in online settings. Therefore, researchers working on gender dynamics in patriarchal societies should consider public spaces as potentially more conducive environments for eliciting rich and detailed narratives, especially when studying topics that challenge traditional gender norms (Heim 2019).

To conclude, the experiences discussed in this paper highlight several insights, including the challenges of conducting interviews in both private and public spaces, the complex role of researcher positionality, nuanced ways in which

gender norms shape participants' willingness to participate in a research study and the limitations of online interviewing in cultural contexts like Pakistan. Although both online and in-person methods have distinct benefits and limitations, the data collected through online interviews failed to meet the expected standards for richness and depth compared to in-person interviews. I found in-person interviewing to be a more viable option in my research context, with comparatively fewer obstacles to building rapport and trust with participants. Insights from this study suggest that future researchers working on sensitive topics in similar settings must carefully consider the assumptions about private and public settings, social context and power relations in both online and in-person interviews and the additional barriers that technology might introduce.

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