

04 Women at Work Stories Behind the Statistics



This Women's Day, we celebrate women who show up to work every day, defying immense odds.



The final part of the Tabadlab 'Access to Agency' series moves beyond statistics to illustrate the lived realities of women navigating work across Pakistan's smaller cities. While global and national indices consistently rank Pakistan among the lowest in female labor force participation,¹ numbers alone cannot capture the everyday negotiations that define women's entry, mobility, and survival in the workplace.²



Through composite personas, this segment presents the journeys of first-generation professionals whose workforce participation illustrates their courage, negotiation, and persistence.

Respondent Profile

50
hours of phone
interviews

24 qualitative interviews
First-generation professional women identified through snowball sampling. These are women whose mothers had not worked outside the home.



Interviews of women who lived in cities and towns across **Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Punjab: Bahawalpur, Gwadar, Loralai, Turbat, Karak, Kohat, Timergarah, Ladda, Peshawar, Quetta, Lahore and Rawalpindi.**

5 married
women

3 women
with disability

5 women
from minority faiths

INTRODUCING THE CAST



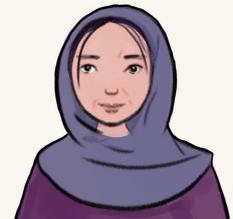
NEELOFAR

negotiates family approval



SAMREEN

strategises to secure her mobility



BATOOL

asserts her credibility and builds social capital

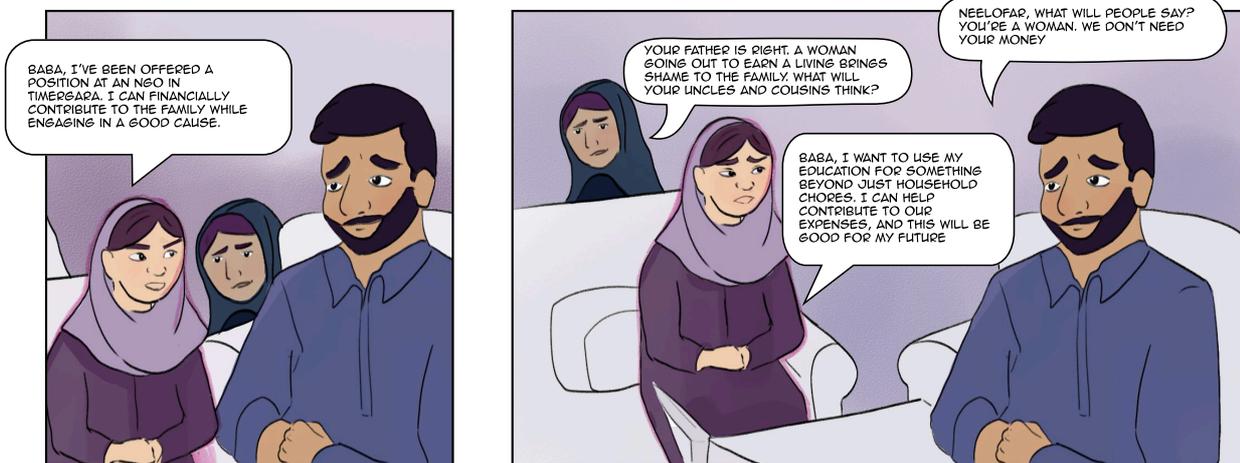
The personas used in this segment are characters based on composite findings from the research, and represent the stories that emerged through the data. Any resemblance to real individuals is incidental.

¹Gender Gap Report 2025 | World Economic Forum

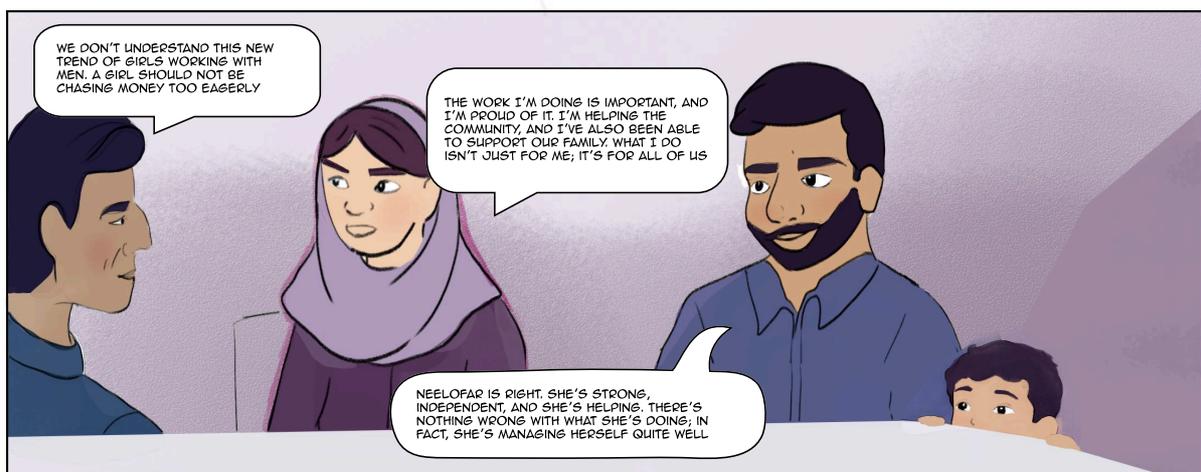
²World Employment and Social Outlook - Trends 2025 | International Labour Organization

STEPPING OUT: THE BIRTH OF A FIRST-GENERATION WORKING WOMAN

NEELOFAR, 25, THE ELDEST OF SIX SIBLINGS, LIVES IN TIMERGARA. NEELOFAR WANTS TO START WORKING. HER MOTHER HAS NEVER WORKED, AND HER FATHER IS CAUTIOUS BUT NOT OPPOSED.



A FEW WEEKS LATER...

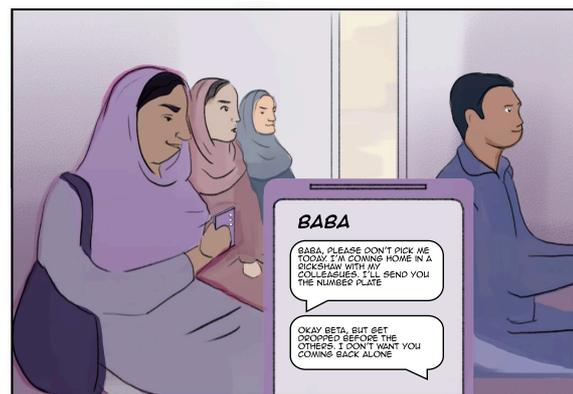
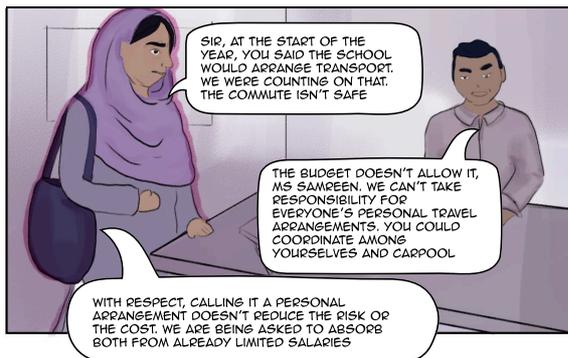


THE COST OF MOBILITY

SAMREEN, 29, IS A TEACHER FROM BAHAWALPUR, AND FACES A COMPLEX DAILY COMMUTE TO WORK, INVOLVING TWO PUBLIC TRANSPORT VEHICLES AND A 20-MINUTE WALK.

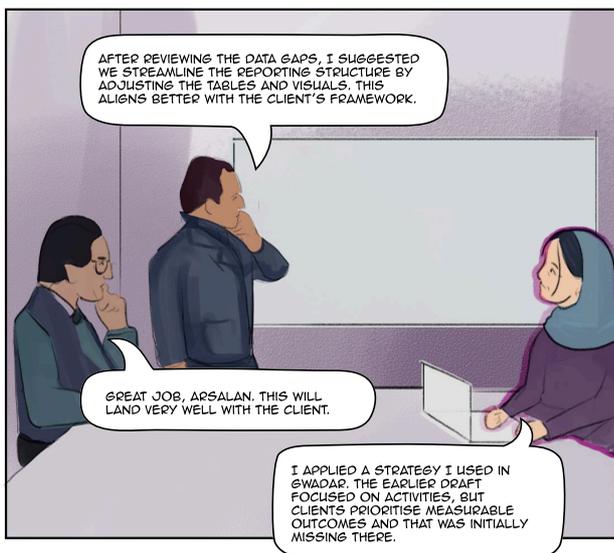


LATER THAT DAY...

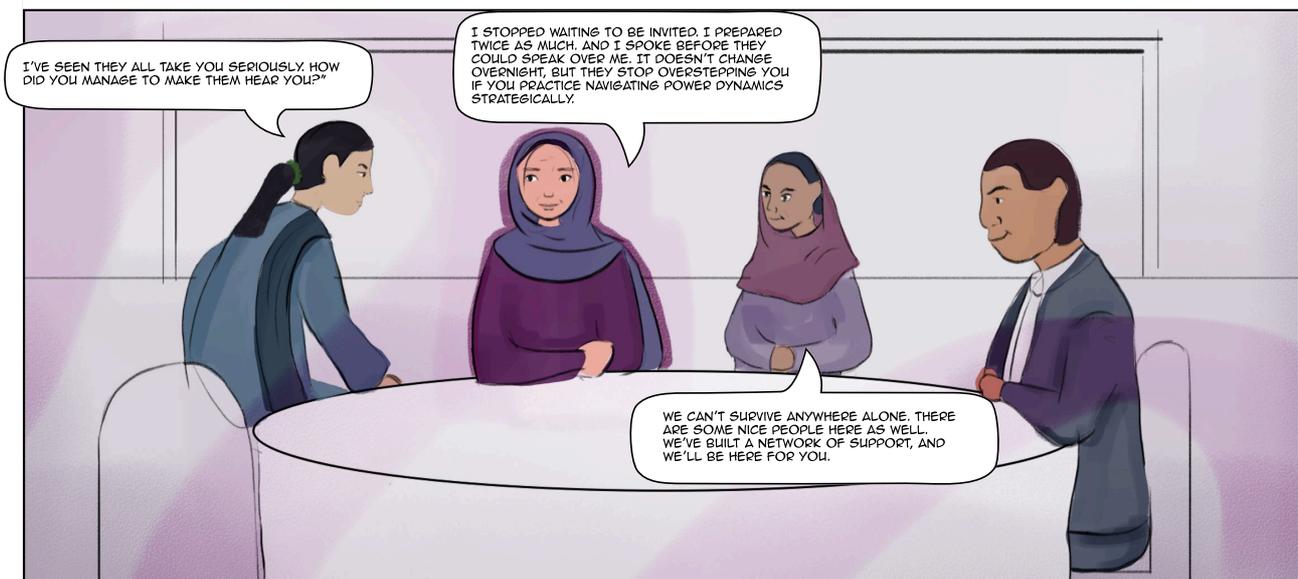


NAVIGATING WORKPLACE DYNAMICS

BATOOL, A 33-YEAR-OLD MARRIED WOMAN WITH FOUR CHILDREN, HAS RECENTLY RELOCATED TO QUETTA FOR WORK. HER FAMILY REMAINS IN GWADAR.



A FEW WEEKS LATER...



CONCLUSION

PERMISSION



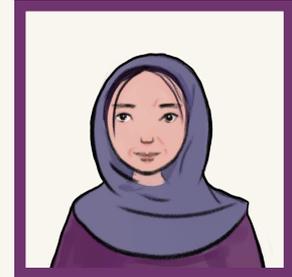
NEELOFAR

MOBILITY



SAMREEN

WORKPLACE LEGITIMACY



BATOOL

OBJECTIVE

To build an identity beyond prescribed domestic roles

To reach work safely

Equal professional recognition

BARRIER

Parental misgivings about social taboos

Unsafe commute

Workplace exclusion

RESILIENCE STRATEGIES

Male endorsement is viewed as public validation.

Family tracking systems to maintain approval.

Peer alliances and mentorship networks to build social capital.

Earnings are redirected toward family welfare to build trust.

Collective commuting arrangements to share cost and reduce risk.

Strategic assertion of documented contributions in formal spaces.

Informal mentoring of younger women reduces perceived risk for others.

Negotiation with employers for safer transit options.

Collective reinforcement of professional boundaries.

SOLUTION

Investing in securing household approval as a stepping stone to social legitimacy.

Designing adaptive mobility systems that ensure sustained labour market participation.

Challenging informal power structures through asserting credibility and building social capital.