



Original Article

Negotiating Present with the Past: An Analytical Study of Gender Performativity in Generation X in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The institution of parenthood is a significant agent of socialization through which children learn values, gender roles, and future responsibilities. In Pakistan, culture, religion, and expectations of honour, conduct, and family duty are pivotal determinants of parenting. The research examines the practice of parenting in Generation X parents through Butler's notion of gender performativity, which elucidates the perpetuation of gender roles in everyday, reiterated practices. Twenty semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten male and ten female parents residing in rural and urban areas near Rawalpindi and Islamabad. The results reveal that, despite parents' beliefs that they were raising their sons and daughters equally, gendered expectations were still deeply entrenched. Sons are socialized to enter the public labour force, and daughters are socialized to be homemakers. Parenting was predominantly influenced and practiced by one's own parents, not by the media, perpetuating generational patterns. Even when education and urbanization introduce some change, social structures such as patriarchy continue to be powerful. The research finds that parenting is the principal site for the performance, reproduction, and transmission of gender norms across generations.

Keywords: *Gender performativity, Gender roles, Generation X, Inequality, Parenting, Patriarchy*

INTRODUCTION

Parenting is an important factor in the development of children's personality, behaviour, and life decisions. In Pakistan, parenting is not merely a private matter between parents and their children; it is informed by culture, religion, tradition, family honour, and gender expectations (Sultana et al., 2013). Parenting within this model involves producing children who uphold family honour, conform to social norms, and become productive members of society. Values such as modesty, obedience, discipline, and gender-specific roles influence the upbringing of children, often without realizing it. The aim of the study is to investigate the meanings and practices of parenthood and the daily constructions of gender among GenX parents in Pakistan, and to examine how these practices shape the gendered experiences of the emerging generation. The research also aims to understand the decision-making process among mothers and fathers in this generation regarding how to raise their children, considering factors such as children's birth order, the division of labour, and the treatment of sons and daughters.

An equally critical goal is to explore how gender norms are generated, reproduced, and sustained along basic parenting routines on the level of daily tasks, discipline, mobility, and possible futures. Applying Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory (Butler, 2020), the research seeks to explore how parents inadvertently perform gender in daily life and how these performances establish long-term social patterns. The research also intends to examine how these parenting styles reinforce macro social structures such as the patriarchy, and how parents orient children towards divergent labour roles, public work for boys and domestic work for girls. Further, we capture rural and

urban experiences to explore how culture, tradition, modernity, and education shape parenting. The broad aim is to offer a clear picture of how gendered parenting is reproduced intergenerationally, what explains the persistence of these roles, and what meanings parents ascribe to them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From an early age, children are socialized into gender roles through routine household activities (domestic chores, conduct in public places, dress, and communication styles) (Shaheed, 2009). To illustrate, girls are taught to assist with housework, to dress modestly, and to be cautious in their behaviour, whereas boys are given more liberty, urged to be assertive, and to assume leadership positions in the community. Neither of these roles is innate, but is developed through daily social and cultural interactions that are taught and handed down across generations (Lorber, 1994). Judith Butler's notion of gender performativity can be used to analyse these practices. Butler (2005) argued that it is not an essence or a fixed state of being, but rather a constitution through the reiterative practices of performance. As parents increasingly tell daughters to stay inside or do housework, and sons to go outside, interact with others, or make decisions, these behaviours start to seem natural.

Gradually, children take these behaviours in as what they come to make up a boy or a girl, even though they are learned socially. This ongoing enactment reproduces within the family and society at large gender roles and associated social constructs (Zaman & Shahid, 2023). In Pakistani culture, parenthood is shaped by various social constructs such as patriarchy, economic burdens, religion, joint family system, and marital stability (Hassan et al., 2022). In the past, authoritarian parenting was believed to be the norm, where children

had to obey elders without questioning them. Fathers would have decision-making power and keep discipline, mothers would do the emotional labour, care, and domestic direction (Choderow, 1978; Hochschild, 1996). Yet parents have become more democratic or participative in their child-rearing with the urbanization, greater education, and media exposure (Kagitcibasi, 2017; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Still, many ingrained cultural expectations remain. For example, daughters, even if they are well educated, may be expected to focus on home duties and preserve modesty of conduct, while sons are trained for public life and financial independence (Khan et al., 2025; Shaheed, 2009).

These ways of parenting also reproduce social structures in several respects. Through the gendered division of labour and role allocation, the family contributes to the maintenance of patriarchal structures, the socio-economic stratification system, and cultural patterns (Bourdieu, 2020; Walby, 1999). Children watch and imitate their parents' behaviours and learn what is appropriate for their gender. The emotional labour of mothers (care, guidance, and nurturing) confirms that women have emotional charge of the family's well-being, whereas the authority of the father instructs children that men are the decision-makers and leaders (Choderow, 1978; Hochschild, 1996). Society thus becomes structured through all these reiterative actions, including hierarchies, gender roles, and economic divisions, and is reproduced from one generation to the next, even if the parents practice some modern or democratic methods. Parenting also prepares children for the labour force, yet this education is markedly different by gender.

Sons are socialized to cultivate skills for public life, to interact socially outside the home, and to assume economic responsibility. This includes going to school, obtaining an education, attaining marketable skills, and being ready for employment (Morgan, 2011). On the contrary, daughters are prepared for the unpaid labour of homemaking. Even girls who manage to obtain an education are often expected to perform domestic work, look after siblings or elders, and practice modesty, which prohibits them from fully accessing the workforce (Shaheed, 2009; Khan et al., 2025). Such preparation enables sons and daughters to perform socially approved economic and household roles that help maintain the gendered division of labour in the larger society. Parents from Generation X (hereafter mentioned as GenX), who were born approximately between 1965 and 1980, find themselves caught between parenting traditions and

modern-day practices (Dimock, 2019).

They lived in mostly traditional and patriarchal societies, but they raised their children amid social transformation, rural-to-urban migration, the availability of education, and access to media (Kagitcibasi, 2017). So, GenX parents are caught in a tug of war between upholding cultural and religious traditions and embracing new social influences. Media and education also impact the way people parent. GenX parents are exposed to different parenting styles and gender role expectations through television, the internet, and global culture (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Urbanization contributes to the shaping of family practices, as both sons and daughters gain increased access to economic and social life. However, the cultural identity of the family, its honour, and standing in the community remain at the core of parenting decisions, which often reinforce the traditional gender role expectations (Hassan, 2022).

Concentrating on the GenX parents, the study aims to explore how parenting practices serve to reproduce social structures, socialize children into gendered labour roles, and manage competing pulls of tradition and modernity. Through the lens of Butler's concept of gender performativity, the study illustrates how enacted parenting tasks reproduce gender continuously. This knowledge helps to explain the continuity and change within social norms in Pakistan, as it illustrates how one generation prepares the next for what are socially expected roles and how they adapt to new societal influences.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on Judith Butler's Gender Performativity Theory, which views gender as an unreal yet deeply social reality that is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts of gender proceed (Butler, 2005) but is rather constituted through those acts. Performing gender means to act as one imagines a gender should act; girls are supposed to act unlike boys and vice versa (although Butler recognizes that gender roles in society are becoming less rigid). Butler suggests that parents perform gender when they act in gendered ways, such as when mothers provide emotional labour and fathers enact authority, and that children come to understand these behaviours as natural roles. The theory aligns perfectly with Pakistani parenting as parents practice these gendered behaviours without questioning them. Daughters perform housework because it is expected, and sons are given more freedom outdoors because boys are supposed to be exposed. This is the effect of everyday

performances that produce and naturalize gender norms. The theory reveals that parenting is itself a stage for the performance of gender identities (which are rehearsed and learned) (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Applying this model provides a rationale for how the patriarchy functions. When fathers make major decisions and mothers do the housework, children are taught about gender hierarchies. These performances reproduce social forms through mundane everyday activities rather than through force or regulation.

METHODOLOGY

This is qualitative research focused on interpreting lived experiences, personal meanings, and emotional insights (Bryman, 2016) articulated by GenX parents. The experience of parenting is profound and culturally influenced, and taking a qualitative approach enabled participants to openly express their views. This approach contributes to understanding the unexpressed reasons for actions and opinions, which may be difficult to reveal when using quantitative tools. The research was conducted using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand people's sense-making of their experiences (Smith et al., 2021). IPA was appropriate to examine how parents interpret their own roles, responsibilities, and gendered expectations.

Participants

The participants of the study were GenX parents, born from 1965 to 1980 cohort, who have at least one child and are engaged in day-to-day parenting. The parents were recruited from rural and urban areas to represent a range of cultural, social, and economic experiences. A purposive sampling method was employed to recruit individuals who met the study's inclusion criteria: GenX parents who had completed their parenting journey. Purposive sampling was suitable because it enables the researcher to select cases that are rich in information and help answer the research question (Campbell et al., 2020). The sample consisted of 20 couples (40 participants), 10 from rural and 10 from urban backgrounds. Rural couples include 10 fathers and 10 mothers. The participants' age range was between 45 and 58 years, and they had been married for 20 to 35 years. Mostly lived in a joint family system and have on average 3 to 5 children, and are linked with farming jobs. For the 10 urban couples, participants were selected from a city in Pakistan, and the age range of both husband and wife was 45-60 years, with marriage years ranging from 20 to 35 years. On average, each couple had 3 children, and 8 out of 10 couples lived in a nuclear family system. Most of them

held government jobs, and a few did independent work or private office jobs. Each of the participants had significant experience in parenting and could share detailed insights into the ways they parented, how gender roles influenced their parenting practices and decision-making, and how these were shaped by social expectations.

Data Collection

The data for the study were collected through an interview guideline prepared for research purposes. The questions concerned the perception of good parenting, parenting practices, and the factors that had influenced the parents' parenting philosophy. Ethical approval for the current research was obtained from the concerning institute. The participants were informed of the study's aim, and their participation was voluntary. They could withdraw from the research at any time. Written and verbal consents were obtained prior to the commencement of each interview. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, no identifiable information was documented. To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were used. The participants were told that the research would be for academic use only. The interviews took place in secure and pleasant environments selected by the participants. Attention was paid to ensure that no sensitive or upsetting issues were raised, and participants were permitted not to answer any question they felt uncomfortable with. Data were collected through in-person and telephone interviews of 30-45 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Urdu, Punjabi, and very simple English. Notes and recordings were taken.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

Thematic analysis was performed on the data. Findings demonstrate a clear pattern of gendered parenting among GenX parents. While numerous parents asserted that they treated sons and daughters equally, their rationales betrayed strong gender divides. Such differences showed up in schedules, expectations, discipline, responsibilities, and notions of the future for children. Domestic responsibilities, freedom of mobility, educational and career expectations, disciplinary and emotional roles, and transformational roles are major themes extracted from the data.

Domestic Responsibilities

All ten women and eight men from the rural background data agreed from the very beginning that daughters are taught to perform household chores. One of the women said that when my daughter was small,

she taught her to help with cleaning and housework. Even when she was very young,

"I wanted her to learn how to manage the house properly. However, my husband and I never told our son to do these things. I focus on my son studying well and enjoying outdoor activities, but on the other side, I always expected my daughter to help in the house."

Another participant explained that as soon as girls are physically able, they are taught household tasks, in which they learn to clean, cook meals, and care for younger siblings. Boys were rarely expected to learn such tasks, even if they could help. One of the women further said that small tasks such as dusting, putting things in place, or helping in the kitchen were taught early. On the other hand, two men mentioned that they treated their children equally and were always taught to share tasks equally. One of the men said,

"I want both my kids to help in the kitchen."

Both my children have learned to perform small chores. Another man added,

"I didn't make any difference between my son and daughter."

Both are taught to help each other with house chores. It is important because it is part of life. This shows that although there are many families who still follow traditional gender roles, some parents are trying to raise their children equally without any gender differences in household responsibilities.

Mobility and Freedom

Freedom to go outside the house is not the same for boys and girls. Many men said that they never put restrictions on their sons; they are freely allowed to go outside and enjoy with their friends, while daughters are not allowed to go outside the home because of safety concerns. One of the fathers said,

I have allowed my son to hang-out with friends do whatever he wants to but I had never allowed my daughter' to go outside alone even if she insists me that she wanted to visit her friend then in such case I'll allow her but with full Parda like dress up in a disciplined manner and with chaddar.

One of the mothers added that even if my daughter insists that she go somewhere or visit a relative,

I had to think several times about what her father would say, because my daughter's safety and our family reputation come first, but boys don't face such restrictions.

Rural families were stricter, one of the participants said,

If my daughter wanted to go outside she should have to go with a male guidance otherwise she is not allowed and my son can go anywhere.

Some urban parents allowed freedom but still had some traditional patterns one urban father said,

I allowed my daughter to study as much as she can or participate in sports activities, but she needs to come back home on time and my son had no such limitations.

This shows that boys are given more mobility and freedom as well as outdoor freedom than girls, while girls had to face restrictions and limitations to protect family honour and reputation, even though the educated parents follow traditional patterns, which shows that cultural expectations are stronger than the modern ideas.

Educational Expectations

Parents are in favour of educating their children, both sons and daughters, but for different reasons and purposes. For the son, education is mainly to get a better job and be the main breadwinner for the family, whereas for daughters, education is seen as a way to manage the home better and for their confidence, but not for financial independence. One of the mothers said,

I had given education to my son so he gets a better job and supports his family, and Alhamdulillah, he is successful in it, and had given education to my daughter as well, but she is not allowed to do any kind of job.

Another participant explained that

"Education is important for girls, but it is not to earn money.

Boys' education is important for work and for family support. Girls' education is necessary for confidence-building and to be a good wife. Urban parents are a little bit different from rural parents. One of the mothers from the urban side said,

I want my daughter to study well and become independent, but we never force our daughter to earn money.

Rural parents are strict on traditional gender rules. One of the fathers said,

Girls should study only at the matric level (10th Grade), that's it, and my thinking is that boys' education is more important than girls' because the next generation is carried forward through them.

Another rural mother added,

Even if the daughters are going to school, their main

responsibility is to manage the house chores, boys are encouraged to study as much as they can in order to support the family system.

This shows that in rural areas, education is seen for girls as a way to build confidence and be smart, but not to earn money. Even when girls are educated, their primary task cannot change. This reflects strong gender expectations in society and the sedimentation of gender roles.

Discipline and Emotional Roles

Mothers perform most of the emotional and daily work while father's set rules and discipline one of the mothers said,

I make sure my children are properly fed, their clothes are clean, I clam them when they fight with each other while my husband focus on correcting the behavior of children, and I do most of the house chores and daily caring work.

One of the fathers said,

I had set rules and guided the children, and when needed, I disciplined them.

Several mothers said this emotional work is tiring, but it is invisible one mother added,

Even when my husband came late at home I was the one who handle children's feelings and had to manage children fighting while managing with the domestic duties, and also keeping the house organized but fathers rarely do such things.

This shows that emotional role is seen as the mother's important role and responsibility, while fathers focus more on authority and discipline.

Transformation of Norms

Parents were highly confident in how they were raised and in how they are raising their children. Much like their own parents had raised them. Some of the mothers said,

I raised my children and was taught to respect elders, be gentle, be punctual, just the way my own parents had taught me.

Another participant added,

I'm living in a city life, but still, I don't believe in modern practices and do not change these rules. Media and modern practices do not affect parenting; respect, discipline, and responsibility are more important than modern ideas.

Some urban parents had minor changes. One of the mothers said,

I allowed my daughter to use a cell phone, and she can

go visit her friend, which my own mother didn't allow me, but she still did not have as much freedom as I've given to my son. I allowed my son to do whatever he wanted.

Another urban father said,

I encouraged both my son and daughter to study equally, but somehow boys have more freedom to move freely and to make decisions.

This clearly shows that gender roles and traditional norms are still very strong, but few parents, especially in urban areas, are trying to make some changes. Gender expectations continue to guide children's education, freedom, and emotional roles, even though parents are aware of modern ideas of equality.

Discussion

The results of this study clearly indicate that the parenting style of GenX in Pakistan is heavily influenced by the cultural expectations and gender roles derived from previous generations. Parents think they are treating their children the same, but the way they behave day to day is informed by ingrained and enduring notions of what boys and girls should grow up to be. This is an example of why Judith Butler has said that gender is not inherent or stable, but rather performed through repeated acts. When parents teach daughters to cook and clean, be modest, and stay indoors, and teach sons to go out, be confident, and make money, those routine acts become gender performances that shape children's sense of self. The interpretation of these results illustrates that gendered identity is constructed not on big moments and decisions, but rather through mundane daily practices that seem normal and harmless. Daughters are made to learn household chores because they will need it in marriage, and sons are exempted from such work on the grounds that their job is to earn.

Parents view the expectations as natural and not socially constructed. It was a reminder that the system of male superiority was reinforced in everyday life and in the home, not through rules and regulations. That is, social orders endure because parents keep engaging in and teaching their children the same gendered practices they learned from their parents. Another factor, labour force conditioning, is so profoundly gendered. Sons are urged to study more confidently, arguing that their education is linked to jobs, leadership, and fiscal responsibility. Parents invest in their sons with the assumption that they will one day support the family. Daughters, on the other hand, are told to study primarily to build confidence, to be good mothers, or get a good proposal. But even when daughters are

highly educated, parents seldom make a connection between their education and financial independence or career advancement. This reflects Butler's notion that gender performances are iterated to align with socially normative roles, men are socialized for public, paid labour, and women are socialized for private, unpaid labour. This gendered readiness is established in early childhood. Parents let their boys roam outdoors, run errands, visit relatives, and venture into public places.

This exposure gives boys lessons in how to talk, negotiate, and make decisions, all of which are needed for public employment. But girls are taught to remain indoors, to be decorous, to avoid superfluous encounters, and to concentrate on domestic duties. These protocols dampen girls' social self-assurance and public role preparation, and ingrain the message that they should keep their place in the home. Again, this is a matter of gender as performance because girls perform modesty, obedience, and domestic skills repeatedly, while boys perform confidence and responsibility in the public arena. The findings reveal how Bourdieu's concept of habitus is realized within Pakistani families (Bourdieu, 2020). Parents brought up their children by the same set of rules and values they had in their own childhood. They apply these rules implicitly, without questioning or thinking about them. This helps to make gender norms seem natural, even though they are socially imposed. And since parents think they are doing the right thing, those gender expectations smoothly pass from one generation to the next. The conversation also suggests a rural-urban split, but it is not deep enough to disrupt broader gender norms.

Urban parents may permit their daughters to study more, use cell phones, or go to school on their own, but they still place many strict limits on their daughters' mobility and conduct. Rural parents place even more stringent restrictions, but as a baseline, the expectations are alike. In this context, daughters are associated with honour, modesty, and domestic work, while sons are associated with earning, the public world, and decision-making. But even when parents are influenced by progressive ideas, they send daughters to school, the essential gender roles go unchallenged. This is reminiscent of how cultural values and norms are modernized rather than altered. Parents may, for example, permit their daughters to pursue an education but still expect them to come home early, avoid social gatherings, and put household chores first. That suggests that cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity are very powerful and enduring. And another big takeaway from that conversation: The media's impact is minimal, especially among GenX

parents. Most parents reported that they had learned to parent from their own elders, rather than from the media, schools, or other sources of information.

Traditions are kept alive because the family is the first point of learning, and it continues to perpetuate old ways. In all, the discussion opens the door to understanding how gender and parenting style among GenX parents are not a matter of individual choices but are embedded in a larger social system that incentivizes certain behaviours for sons and others for daughters. Parenting is the primary site for the reproduction of gender norms, and through this reproduction, social structures such as patriarchy are maintained. There are some superficial changes (such as valuing daughters' education), but the deep structures remain unchanged. Parents continue to parent in ways that align with traditional gender expectations, indicating that change is slow and shaped by wider cultural ideologies.

CONCLUSION

The parenting of GenX parents in Pakistan is still greatly shaped by the cultural, patriarchal, and gendered values. Parents follow the same parenting styles that they experienced from their parents, perpetuating gender norms in parenting across generations. Sons were socialized to labour and rule in public places, daughters to domestic obligation and humble conduct. And when parents think they are treating their children the same, there are unconscious gendered expectations that steer how they do it." Applying Butler's perspective, it is evident that parenting is the primary site at which gender-role performance is both enacted and sustained. If we are going to get real change, parents have to actively interrogate the everyday practices they take for granted but that are laden with traditional gendered messages.

Limitations

The study is limited by its small sample size and its focus on a single generation. However, despite these limitations, the research remains strong because it offers deep qualitative insights, rich cultural detail, and theoretical clarity on gender performativity in the local context.

Competing Interest

The authors had no competing interests.

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