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Balancing profession, family and cultural norms by women dentists in Pakistan

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Introduction: ‘Feminization of dentistry’ in Pakistan is clearly visible in an average dental class’ gender distribution that boasts of 70-80% female students. Yet after graduation, many of these women choose not to pursue their careers, resulting in a void of practicing dentists in the country.

Aim: This phenomenological designed qualitative study aimed to investigate the reasons behind this dynamic.

Methods: Fourteen (14) in-depth interviews and two focus groups discussion from a rich and diverse sample of 20 purposively selected working and non-working, younger and older women dentists obtained data to achieve saturation. All interviews were audio recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, transcripts analyzed and coded into themes and sub-themes. Respondent validation and investigator triangulation ensured validity and credibility of findings.

Findings: The core finding is that a support system, driven by economic need, is an essential pre-requisite facilitating a woman dentist to pursue her career. Three peripheral themes were (1) traditional gender roles restrict women dentists from pursuance of career but come into play only if economic need is absent; (2) becoming a dentist enhances marriage prospects, lending to the concept of ‘doctor brides’. Married into rich families, practicing the profession becomes secondary; (3) motherhood is a barrier to full time career pursuance and if economic needs are met, most prioritize motherhood over profession.

Conclusion: In conclusion, the average graduating dentist in Pakistan is female, from an expensive private dental college, often marrying well based on her ‘doctor’ title. Since ‘economic need’ is a dominant determinant of pursuance of career, a majority of women dentists opt for the luxury of choosing not to work. Recommendations include revision of admission policies of dental colleges and retentive protocols linked to renewal of license to practice.

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