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Global Sociological Review

p-ISSN:2708-2091
e-ISSN:2708-3586

GSR

GLOBAL SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW

HEC-RECOGNIZED CATEGORY-Y

VOL. X ISSUE IV, Fall (DECEMBER-2025)

Double-blind Peer-review Research Journal

www.gsrjournal.com

© Global Sociological Review

DOI (Journal): 10.31703/gsr

DOI (Volume): 10.31703/gsr.2025(X)

DOI (Issue): 10.31703/gsr.2025(X-IV)

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Article title

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Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, media representation, working women, gender, Pakistan, Fairclough

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Pages: 69-79

DOI: 10.31703/gsr.2025(X-IV).06

DOI link: [https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2025\(X-IV\).06](https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2025(X-IV).06)

Article link: <http://www.gsrjournal.com/article/representation-of-working-women-in-pakistani-media-a-critical-discourse-analysis-of-dawn-newspaper-headlines>

Full-text Link: <https://gsrjournal.com/article/representation-of-working-women-in-pakistani-media-a-critical-discourse-analysis-of-dawn-newspaper-headlines>

PDF link: <https://www.gsrjournal.com/jadmin/Author/31rvlola2.pdf>

Global Sociological Review

p-ISSN: [2708-2091](https://doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2025(X-IV).06) e-ISSN: [2708-3586](https://doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2025(X-IV).06)

DOI(journal): 10.31703/gsr

Volume: X (2025)

DOI (volume): 10.31703/gsr.2025(X)

Issue: IV Fall (December-2025)

DOI(Issue): 10.31703/gsr.2024(X-IV)

Home Page

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Volume: (2025)

<https://www.gsrjournal.com/Current-issues>

Issue: IV-Fall (December -2025)

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Citing this Article

06	Representation of Working Women in Pakistani Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Dawn Newspaper Headlines		
Authors	Barkah Laiba Javid	DOI	10.31703/gsr.2025(X-IV).06
		Pages	69-79
		Year	2025
		Volume	X
		Issue	IV
Referencing & Citing Styles			
APA	Barkah, & Javid, L. (2025). Representation of Working Women in Pakistani Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Dawn Newspaper Headlines. <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , X(IV), 69-79. https://doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2025(X-IV).06		
CHICAGO	Barkah, and Laiba Javid. 2025. "Representation of Working Women in Pakistani Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Dawn Newspaper Headlines." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> X (IV):69-79. doi: 10.31703/gsr.2025(X-IV).06.		
HARVARD	BARKAH & JAVID, L. 2025. Representation of Working Women in Pakistani Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Dawn Newspaper Headlines. <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , X, 69-79.		
MHRA	Barkah, and Laiba Javid. 2025. 'Representation of Working Women in Pakistani Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Dawn Newspaper Headlines', <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , X: 69-79.		
MLA	Barkah, and Laiba Javid. "Representation of Working Women in Pakistani Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Dawn Newspaper Headlines." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> X.IV (2025): 69-79. Print.		
OXFORD	Barkah and Javid, Laiba (2025), 'Representation of Working Women in Pakistani Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Dawn Newspaper Headlines', <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , X (IV), 69-79.		
TURABIAN	Barkah and Laiba Javid. "Representation of Working Women in Pakistani Media: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Dawn Newspaper Headlines." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> X, no. IV (2025): 69-79. https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2025(X-IV).06 .		



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Abstract

This paper discusses the portrayal of working women in Pakistan by discussing ten headlines of the English-based newspaper Dawn. The study investigates the textual, contextual, and socio-political aspects of the media discourse based on the three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis developed by Fairclough (1995, 2001). The results indicate a two-sided representation: women are both depicted as vulnerable, who are overwhelmed with unpaid care and lack of systems, and as agents of change and contributing to society. The discussion reveals the presence of repetitive ideologies of patriarchy, gendered work, and social conventions and illustrates how headlines serve as a form of ideology that reflects and constructs the perception of the general population. The article highlights the significance of media literacy and the inclusion of discourse to ensure fair representation and inclusion of women in the social and economic life of Pakistan.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, media representation, working women, gender, Pakistan, Fairclough

Introduction

Media is very important in influencing the perceptions and the social norms of people, especially gender roles. The contribution of women to the working population in Pakistan has been growing in

recent years, but still, women are exposed to structural, cultural, and economic obstacles. The newspaper headlines as a condensed version of discourse, are a potent tool in that they can be used to reflect as well as to reinforce the societal ideologies regarding women. The media portrayal of women as



vulnerable, burdened and empowered may affect the attitudes of people, their policy choices and the general discussion of gender equality.

This paper is centered on how the English language newspaper *Dawn* covers the issue of working women on the basis of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Through the analysis of ten recent headlines concerning the topic of women's labor, autonomy, and socio-economic involvement, this study will focus on revealing the ideologies within the media discourse and how language, context, and the socio-political constructions intersect to create perceptions of women in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. How are working women represented in *Dawn* newspaper headlines?
2. What linguistic, contextual, and socio-political features are used to construct these representations?
3. What patterns or ideologies about gender roles and women's labor emerge from the headlines?

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the textual, contextual, and socio-political dimensions of selected *Dawn* headlines using Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model.
2. To identify recurring themes and ideologies in the representation of working women.
3. To evaluate how media discourse reflects or challenges societal perceptions of women's roles, autonomy, and labor participation in Pakistan.

Literature Review

The media is crucial in influencing the perceptions of the masses, creating the social reality or replicating or challenging gender norms (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998). Many studies have investigated the representation of roles of women in different genres of media and it has been found that media discourse tends to represent structures of broader societal power and gender inequities. To illustrate, the study by Riaz on the news media in the world shows that gender

representations are not only a reflection of dominant ideologies in the world, but they also lead to the strengthening of stereotypical roles of men and women (Riaz, 2024). The representation of women in the media has been explored in various media in the context of Pakistan. In a critical discourse analysis of Pakistani news outlets, Sadia, Ahmed, and Riaz (2022) have discovered that the broadcast news tends to portray women either as traditional or subordinate, as weak or without control in patriarchal systems. This implies that there is a consistent trend of representation in the gendered manner that reflects the society.

In a similar study, the corpus-based analysis of Pakistani English newspapers, such as *Dawn*, conducted by Asghar and Akhter (2022) demonstrated that women have been underrepresented and portrayed as a marginalized minority in news, which enhances gender bias in news coverage. This fact highlights the significance of media discourse analysis as a location where gendered power relations are created and shared with society.

These results are consistent with the rest of the literature on media studies that suggest that news headlines and content tend to reinforce gender stereotypes by downplaying the role of women or presenting them in a manner that highlights their vulnerability instead of their agency (Yaseen, Asghar, and Sardar, 2023). In general, these analyses confirm that gender representation in media discourse is one of the critical fields of inquiry as it affects the perception of the social, economic, and political roles of women by the population.

Although some of the present studies have identified gendered representations of women in Pakistani media, most of the literature has investigated general representation of women in larger bodies of text, including full news stories or broadcasts (Sadia et al., 2022; Asghar and Akhter, 2022; Yaseen et al., 2023). Nevertheless, little has been done in examining headlines which form the most visible and ideology influencing aspects of news media. Headlines do not only represent summaries and are potent frames that precondition the way in which the audiences perceive the news (Fairclough, 1995). Such gap is significant

since headlines are the initial (and in some cases the only) section of a news piece that a reader is exposed to and they possess some unique linguistic and ideological characteristics that have significant consequences on gender discourse in the mass media.

Moreover, most of the current studies use Van Dijk socio cognitive approach or general content analysis instead of the three dimensional model proposed by Fairclough which methodically associates textual characteristics with discursive practices and socio political environments. Although works like Yahya, Anwar, and Zaki (2022) have applied Fairclough model to the analysis of political talk shows, and other studies have used the model to examine the televised narrative or advertisement (Fatima, Sabeen, and Mehboob, 2024), there is an evident gap when it comes to the application of the model in terms of the analysis of the print news headlines concerning the working women in Pakistan. Such a gap restricts knowledge of the ways in which the linguistic selections in headlines form gendered labor discourses in particular and how they overlap with socio economic ideologies.

To fill this gap, the current study addresses the critical discourse analysis of the Dawn newspaper headlines on working women in Pakistan with the three dimensional model of Fairclough (1995, 2001). This method gives the opportunity to examine the role of linguistic components (textual), practices of production and distribution (contextual), and socio political consequences (social practice) in the formation of images of the economic functions of women in a very detailed way. Through the study of headlines like “*What happens when you let women live alone?*” and “*Women shoulder most unpaid care work in Pakistan, says ILO*”, this paper aims to uncover the way gender ideologies are encoded in the news and how gender ideologies can support, oppose, or naturalize the social limits to women involvement in labor.

Also, the study will add to the existing body of knowledge by offering contextualized empirical data of a country where women workforce participation is a contentious issue mediated by socio cultural norms which are highly anchored in the society. The study

addresses a methodological and thematic gap in prior studies and allows one to see the role of media in creating gendered labor discourses in a more refined manner.

Methodology:

Theoretical Framework

The three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) proposed by Fairclough (1995, 2001) is the framework used in the study based on the analysis of the relationship between language, power and ideology in texts. The model by Fairclough focuses on three dimensions that are related to each other:

Textual Analysis is concentrating on linguistic elements like vocabulary, grammar, metaphors, and rhetorical elements. It enables the researchers to study how the meaning is built in the text. To illustrate, the words we use to characterize working women may be biased on the assumption of either their agency, vulnerability, or empowerment.

Discursive Practice Analysis (Contextual) is the study of the production, circulation and reading of texts in a particular social and institutional context. Authorship, publication platform, and the intended audience are some of the factors to be considered in this dimension (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2001). In this paper, a discussion of headlines in a national newspaper will shed light on the ways in which the media language constructs issues concerning the topic of female labor and employment.

Social Practice Analysis (Socio-political) places text in the context of larger social and structural forces, examining how they reproduce, challenge or normalize social ideologies, power relations and cultural norms (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001). In the Pakistani context, this involves ideologies of patriarchy, gendered labor division as well as socio-economic development.

The model suggested by Fairclough is specifically applicable to the current study since it allows conducting a multi-layered analysis of media headlines, which will allow the researcher to relate linguistic decisions to the socio-political reality at

large. This framework will help in making sure that the study is not just a description of language, but also a critical questioning of the power relations and ideologies that are inherent in the discourse of media.

Data Source

The analysis relies on ten headlines of the news published in the English-language Pakistani national

newspaper Dawn within the period of October 2024 and January 2026. The headlines was also chosen purposively according to the explicit nature of the topic discussed in the headline which was working women, labor participation and socio-economic barriers and thus the content of each text is rich to be analyzed critically.

Table 1

Selected Headlines from Dawn

No	Headline	Author	Date
1	What happens when you let women live alone? Pakistan needs to find out	Shanze Hasan	Dec 13, 2025
2	Pakistan's economic future grows stronger when women have the freedom to live, and work, on their own terms	Shanze Hasan	Dec 13, 2025
3	What happens to women garment workers 'behind the seams'	Khalid Hasnain	Dec 8, 2025
4	Women shoulder most unpaid care work in Pakistan, says ILO	Amin Ahmed	Oct 30, 2025
5	What's holding women back from 'decent work' in Pakistan? (Hint: It's not skills)	Nida Kirmani	Jul 16, 2025
6	Working women urge action amid climate, connectivity challenges	The Newspaper's Staff Reporter	Oct 20, 2024
7	No room to feed: The hidden struggles of working mothers in Pakistan	Lubna Naz	Aug 22, 2025
8	Women face greater job displacement risk from artificial intelligence, UN warns	Amin Ahmed	Oct 19, 2025
9	Female employment in federal govt remains low	Khaleeq Kiani	Feb 6, 2025
10	Issues faced by home-based woman workers discussed	The Newspaper's Staff Reporter	Mar 10, 2024

Analysis Procedure

The three dimensions of CDA by Fairclough are used in analysing the data:

Textual Analysis

The lexical choices, metaphors, grammatical structures, and rhetorical devices are analyzed in the headlines (Fairclough, 1995). As an example, hidden exploitation is mentioned using metaphors such as "*behind the seams*"; and verbs and adjectives reflect agency or vulnerability of women.

Contextual- Discursive Practice Analysis

The research takes into account the creation, transmission and consumption of headlines. The identity of the newspaper, authorship, the date of publication and the intended reader are examined so as to comprehend the process of discourse construction and circulation (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2001).

Social Practice Analysis (Socio-political)

The headlines are understood in greater social, cultural and political frameworks to reveal the latent ideologies, such as patriarchy, gendered labor standards and social-economic relations of power (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2001). This dimension connects textual and contextual results to bigger structures in society.

Ethical Considerations

The research employs publically available newspaper headlines with due credit to their authors and dates of publication, and this would mean that academic integrity and ethical conduct of research is being followed.

Data Analysis:

Findings

Headline 1: *“What happens when you let women live alone? Pakistan needs to find out”* – Shanze Hasan, Dec 13, 2025

Textual Analysis

Lexical choices: The usage of the word “let” implies permission and control, thus women need approval by society to live on their own.

Rhetorical devices: The headline is in a question form, as this creates curiosity but also presents the situation as something unusual or even troublesome.

Presupposition: Women living alone are assumed to be rare or socially controversial act.

Contextual Analysis

It is published in Dawn, which is aimed at urban and educated Pakistani readers. The format of the questions will probably attract the attention of the readers and promote the discussion, which is a feature of journalism, attracting attention to social problems.

Socio-Political Analysis

The headline shows the patriarchal rules of the society in which the independence of women is questionable. It indirectly emphasizes the conflict between the traditional gender roles and the modern social transformation and implies that the freedom of

women is connected with the general social and cultural discussion.

Headline 2: *“Pakistan’s economic future grows stronger when women have the freedom to live, and work, on their own terms”* – Shanze Hasan, Dec 13, 2025

Textual Analysis

Lexical choices: “freedom”, “on their own terms” emphasizes empowerment, and autonomy.

Rhetorical framing: The argument connects the personal liberation of women with the economic growth of a nation, which makes the problem socially and politically important.

Contextual Analysis

The headline is the same as the last one, same newspaper (Dawn) and author, which means that this was part of a series of articles or commentary on women empowerment. It must be assumed that the statement targets policymakers and socially oriented readers who would see the independence of women as a national, but not a personal challenge.

Socio-Political Analysis

Positions the independence of women as an economically advantageous factor, and the discourse of empowerment becomes consistent with national development discourse. Implicates the change of the perception in the society, and the role of a woman as an active participant in the labor force and development of a country.

Headline 3: *“What happens to women garment workers ‘behind the seams’”* – Khalid Hasnain, Dec 8, 2025

Textual Analysis

Word choice: “behind the seams” is a metaphor that points to the unseen working, exploitation, or neglect. Words such as “what happens to” indicate the exposure of invisible suffering, which demonstrates the inferior status of women in the garment business.

Contextual Analysis

A national newspaper, published in Dawn, that has readers in urban areas and policy-makers. The headline probably triggers the readers to doubt the

labor practices, as it is an instrument of journalism to be aware of gendered labor conditions.

Socio-Political Analysis

Shows how the labor system is unequal across the board, especially to women. Connections with the wider socio-political issues like human rights of the workers, economic exploitation, and gender inequality in the manufacturing industry in Pakistan. Strengthens the perception that the role of women in labor is essential but underestimated, with reference to structural patriarchy at work.

Headline 4: “*Women shoulder most unpaid care work in Pakistan, says ILO*” – Amin Ahmed, Oct 30, [2025](#)

Textual Analysis

Lexical decisions: “shoulder” means burden and responsibility; accents on the work of women as heavy and mostly invisible. Emphasis on unpaid work points to inequality in the domestic and caregiving roles.

Contextual Analysis

Published in Dawn that has urban educated audience, mention of ILO gives authority and credibility. Framing is probably aimed at policy-makers and socially-conscious readers.

Socio-political Analysis

Exposes gender inequality in structure, women have fewer chances to work in the paid labor force due to the unpaid care work. References to the larger discussion of gendered economic roles and patriarchal expectations.

Headline 5: “*What’s holding women back from ‘decent work’ in Pakistan? (Hint: It’s not skills)*” – Nida Kirmani, Jul 16, [2025](#)

Textual Analysis

Question of rhetoric attracts attention. Phrase “it’s not skills” shifts blame from women to structural and social barriers.

Contextual Analysis

Dawn, English-language newspaper, powerful among policy-makers and professionals. Headline suggests critical or investigative style which is typical of opinion or analysis articles.

Socio-political Analysis

Uncovers patriarchal and institutional restrictions

such as discrimination at the workplace, social conventions. Exposes incompatibility between the capacity of women and the opportunity in society.

Headline 6: “*Working women urge action amid climate, connectivity challenges*” – Staff Reporter, Oct 20, [2024](#)

Textual Analysis

“Urge action” shows women as active agents rather than passive. Raises intersectional concerns like climate change and connectivity affecting employment.

Contextual Analysis

Published in Dawn, which might be a part of policy-based reporting. Staff reporter represent impersonal voice, objective framing.

Socio-political Analysis

Demonstrates the impact of structural infrastructural problems on women labor, the connection between gender and economic and environmental policy and portrays women as stakeholders who require change.

Headline 7: “*No room to feed: The hidden struggles of working mothers in Pakistan*” – Lubna Naz, Aug 22, [2025](#)

Textual Analysis

“No room to feed” stresses the real-life obstacles to maternity, “hidden struggles” implies that the needs of working mothers are neglected in the society.

Contextual Analysis

Published in Dawn, urban working parents, policymakers, are likely to be the readers. Framing promotes compassion and understanding of women who struggle to balance work and caregiving.

Socio-political Analysis

Highlights structural negligence (work policies, maternity absence). Strengthens the intersection of gender roles and labor rules in Pakistani society.

Headline 8: “*Women face greater job displacement risk from artificial intelligence, UN warns*” – Amin Ahmed, Oct 19, [2025](#)

Textual Analysis

“Greater job displacement risk” shows women as vulnerable to technological change. Use of “UN”

gives international authority and credibility.

Contextual Analysis

Dawn, urban readership in English; is policy-oriented. Headline educates and cautions the readers of socio-economic dangers on the rise.

Socio-political Analysis

The heading indicates structural inequalities in technology and workforce access and also highlight intersection of gender, labor, and globalization.

Headline 9: *“Female employment in federal govt remains low”*– Khaleeq Kiani, Feb 6, [2025](#)

Textual Analysis

Words "remains low" shows the continued underrepresentation of women and concentrates on statistical disparity and not the agency of individuals.

Contextual Analysis

Dawn, targeted readership policy-makers. It presents reports and factual demographics of the workforce.

Socio-political Analysis

It exposes institutional obstacles in government jobs and reflects persistent gendered inequalities in formal sector opportunities.

Headline 10: *“Issues faced by home-based woman workers discussed”*– Staff Reporter, Mar 10, [2024](#)

Textual Analysis

Focus on “home-based woman workers” puts emphasis on informal economy work. Word “discussed” is passive form, signifies attention but not necessarily action.

Contextual Analysis

Dawn, general coverage informs the readers about aware of home-based female labor. Impartial journalistic style, presumably to point out policy holes.

Socio-political Analysis

This headline indicates the marginalization of women in the informal labor and highlights deficiencies in formal employment, social and economic safety of home-based workers.

Discussion

The ten Dawn newspaper headlines analysis shows

that there are several patterns of representation of working women in the Pakistani media discourse. Based on the three-dimensional model created by Fairclough (1995, 2001), one can conclude that the decisions in language, framing, and socio-political consequences intersect to create certain ideologies regarding the role of women, their autonomy, and their involvement in labor.

Construction of Women Vulnerability and Burden

One of the common motifs in some of the headlines (e.g., “Women shoulder most unpaid care work in Pakistan, says ILO”; “No room to feed: The hidden struggles of working mothers”) is that women are portrayed as bearers of uneven burden, especially in unpaid domestic and caregiving work. The use of terms like “shoulder” or “no room to feed” suggest the weight and invisibility of women work and position it as a structural problem and not an individual decision. It is consistent with the earlier studies that suggest that the Pakistani media tends to represent the work of women as mainly reproductive or domestic, and supports patriarchal beliefs (Sadia, Ahmed, and Raza, [2022](#); Asghar and Akhter, [2022](#)). Contextually, these headlines were printed in Dawn, which is a newspaper with a readership of educated, policy-makers, which implies that, these stories are meant to bring to the attention of decision-makers the inequalities of gendered labor.

Agency and Empowerment Representation

Some of the headlines are vulnerable (e.g., “Pakistan’s economic future grows stronger when women have the freedom to live, and work, on their own terms”; “Working women urge action amid climate, connectivity challenges”) present women as the ones, who act and shape society and economy. The use of lexical words like “freedom” and “urge action”, is used to place stress on autonomy and advocacy, unlike the headlines where women are depicted as passive or overwhelmed. These findings demonstrate a discursive duality of the Pakistani media where women are both vulnerable and empowered. Such duality is aligned with the idea of Fairclough (1995)

that media discourse tends to include conflicting representations, and that such representations depict some underlying social tensions. It is also echoed by the authors in Yaseen, Asghar, and Sardar (2023), who pointed out that the empowerment of women is occasionally promoted in Pakistani English newspapers, but it is frequently placed within economic or social restrictions.

Exposure of Systemic Inequalities

A number of headlines attract attention to structural and systemic disadvantages of women, especially in the labor markets. One such example is “What’s holding women back from ‘decent work’? (Hint: It’s not skills)”, “Women face greater job displacement risk from artificial intelligence, UN warns”, and “Female employment in federal govt remains low”. The textual analysis of these headlines indicates clear recognition of the external barriers, and the socio-political analysis associates these barriers with the patriarchal norms, policy gaps, and economic inequities. This proves the findings of Kirmani (2025) and Ahmed (2025) that Pakistani media occasionally focuses on the absence of structural support in women instead of personal failure, is an understanding of the inequality of systems in the labor and technology access.

The use of Headlines as Ideological Tools

The results prove that headlines not only outline the news but also serve as ideological tools that influence how the people think. Such headlines as “What happens when you let women live alone?” imply societal anxiety about women’s independence, whereas others, like “Women shoulder most unpaid care work in Pakistan, says ILO”, reflect on the ongoing inequalities. Fairclough (1995) framework highlights that linguistic decisions, situation, and position in socio-political context reproduce or challenge relations of power. In this analysis, Dawn headlines reproduce some patriarchal ideologies especially on the issue of domestic duties of women, and at the same time promote the idea of empowerment and policy concern, displaying a

complicated negotiation between tradition and modernity in Pakistani media discourse.

The patterns are in line with the discourse of empowerment and subordination, which is in line with past empirical research (Sadia et al., 2022; Yaseen et al., 2023; Asghar and Akhter, 2022). . Additionally, this paper has shown that headlines in and of themselves can be incredibly informative about gender ideologies and labor processes that should prompt additional research based on CDA in Pakistan. This research validates and expands the prior studies by demonstrating that the three-dimensional model of CDA developed by Fairclough (1995, 2001) is very useful in analyzing newspaper headings and that the interaction between language preferences, media framing, and socio-political contexts is effective in creating gender ideologies. In line with Sadia et al. (2022) and Yaseen et al. (2023), the discourse indicates that the media in Pakistan serves as the reflector and the perpetrator of how the people perceive women labor, with patriarchal structures continuing to prevail even in the contexts of empowerment discourse. Overall, the analysis shows that the Dawn headlines represent working women in a contradictory way as they have both aspects of showing vulnerability and agency. The headlines are ideological locations, which displays the fears of society as well as the progressive discourses. Through the three-dimensional CDA, the research was able to connect language preferences to the social and political organizations, and so it can be of great value to scholars, policy-makers, and media professionals who are interested in gender representations in Pakistan.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to use the three-dimensional approach to critical discourse analysis developed by Fairclough (1995, 2001) to examine how working women in Dawn newspaper headlines are represented. The results show a two-sided discourse, women are shown as vulnerable due to their unpaid care work and as having systemic barriers, and as active, who can contribute to society and promote change. News about structural inequalities, including restricted access to decent employment, replacement

of work by technology, and underrepresentation in government, remind of the continued role of patriarchal standards and socio-economic limitations. In general, the discussion shows that newspaper

headlines are effective instruments of ideology, as they can both reveal and influence the attitudes of society to the work and independence of women.

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