

COOP
DESIGN
RESEARCH

—
M.S.C.
PROGRAM

UNVEILING GENDERED NARRATIVES IN PAKISTANI KITCHENS

A STUDY OF KITCHEN DESIGN, GENDER ROLES
AND SOCIETAL PERSPECTIVES IN PAKISTAN

—
Sara Masood

ABSTRACT

Food in Pakistan is a prominent expression of the country's cultural identity, with the kitchen being the nucleus of culinary artistry, often referred to as the heart of the house. Unlike commercial kitchens, Pakistan's domestic kitchen is traditionally perceived as a space predominantly inhabited by women, in which traditional roles and cultural stereotypes are deeply embedded. This thesis explores the intricate relationship between domestic kitchen spaces and gender roles in Pakistan's patriarchal society. Despite the increasing participation of women in the labour force, traditional social and cultural norms persist in confining them to domestic roles. At the intersection of social and cultural history, gender studies, and design research, this study seeks to understand the structures and hierarchies within an average Pakistani household, by focusing on the complexity of gendered roles within the domestic sphere. Considering the kitchen, which is regarded as an exclusively female workplace, this thesis questions the conventional representation of women as housewives and homemakers. Referring to the theories of secondwave feminism, it argues against the association and romanticization of womanhood with domesticity and the role of women-centric spaces in shaping women's identities and experiences.

Complementing the theoretical analysis with qualitative interviews, my research further investigates how women navigate and claim space within the kitchen, often operating under the confines of privacy and gender segregation. Considering the viewpoint of female architects, it reconsiders the design of open-plan modern kitchens, usually regarded as progressive and innovative, and argues that modern kitchens serve to liberate women from spatial confinement to a singular space, or that the invisible borders of domestic responsibilities persist in confining them within modernistic yet restrictive paradigms.

The aim of this study is not only to understand the gender asymmetries in the domestic landscape of Pakistani kitchens but also to critically question whether the kitchen can be a place of both containment and empowerment, where women sometimes discover avenues for personal liberation and determination. Turning it into a space of safety, self-definition, and power. In addition, it also explores the social hierarchy within the kitchen space where women become secondary users as supervisors, while domestic help predominates as the primary user of the kitchen space, which highlights the complex multilayered social hierarchy in this domestic space.

Keywords: Domestic Kitchen, Gender, Women