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(Un)safe Spaces: Navigating Risk and Protection in Pakistani Women's Hostels

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Abstract: This paper contributes to feminist urban geographies by drawing attention to gendered danger in the supposedly "safe" space of a women's hostel in urban Pakistan. While hostels are supposed to protect women against male sexual violence, residents suffer physical, financial, emotional, and reputational forms of danger. Hostel residents carry out safety work to mitigate these threats within the private space of the hostel, showing how gendered forms of danger and safety management continue to play out in supposedly "safe" spaces.

Keywords: safety work, gender, women, Pakistan, safe spaces, hostels

Introduction

Feminist scholars have consistently challenged the assumption that unknown strangers in the public sphere are the greatest threat to women's safety, pointing out the forms of violence that threaten women within the home, intimate relationships, and within institutions that supposedly offer safety (Hague and Malos 2004; Pfitzner et al. 2023; Taylor et al. 2022). Drawing on anthropological fieldwork in a women's hostel in Lahore, Pakistan, this paper shows how institutions that ostensibly protect migrant women from danger are experienced less as refuges from a hostile outside world than as loci for physical, emotional, and reputational jeopardy. Female hostel residents—commonly called "hostel girls"—are expected to endure these dangers because they themselves are conceptualised as risky as well as vulnerable to risk, threatening established gender norms by their living away from home and their suspected consequent moral laxity. The gendered violence facing hostel girls thus extends beyond a narrow conceptualisation of sexual threat towards symbolic and structural forms of harm.

The paper contributes to feminist urban geographies by complicating ideas of safety and unsafety within distinct spaces of the city, troubling the distinction between public as unsafe and private as safe. Drawing on notions of safety work (Vera-Gray 2018), virtue maintenance (Lennox 2022), and purdah as a technique of mobility (Husain 2022), I show how hostel residents actively strategise to protect themselves from harm within the confines of the hostel as well as the wider

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urban environment. The paper begins with an outline of the research context before reviewing the literature on hostels, safe spaces, and safety work. A discussion of the methodology precedes a number of findings, showing how hostels are experienced as ambiguously safe spaces characterised by insanitary conditions, authoritarian tyranny, lack of surveillance, and morally suspect residents, and how hostel girls manage these dangers within the boundaried space of the hostel.

Context

Rural to urban migration accounted for about 11.7% of all migration within Pakistan in 2020–2021 (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2022:65); 13.7% of male migrants are rural to urban migrants, in comparison to 10.5% of women migrants. Causes of migration within Pakistan vary markedly by gender and reflect patriarchal norms that associate public space with men and domestic space with women. The most common reasons for female migration are marriage (63.3%), movement with spouse (16.2%), or movement with parents (12.2%). In comparison, the most common reasons for men's migration include moving with parents (30.7%), searching for a job (15.7%), or finding a job (10.4%) (Pakistan Bureau of Statistics 2022:66–67). Cohering with Alvi's (2013) point that Pakistani women's mobility is structured by age and marital status, with young, unmarried women the most limited in their movement outside domestic space, these statistics suggest that while male mobility is justified in relation to gendered expectations for male employment and household provision, women's mobility is legitimised by the co-presence of adult kin, specifically parents or spouses.

Women migrating without coresident male relatives face multiple challenges, both practical and ideological. In particular, cultural norms of purdah in South Asian and Muslim societies, which emphasise gendered spatial segregation (Papanek and Minault 1982), mean that women living without familial supervision are often suspected of moral laxity and sexual promiscuity (Husain 2024). Lodhi (2024) describes how prospective female tenants in Pakistani cities encounter intrusive surveillance, highly restrictive tenancy arrangements, and often find that landlords refuse to rent to a single woman at all; similarly, Bernroider (2018) notes how single women renters in Delhi struggle to find suitable accommodation and often face suspicion of their motivations for living alone. At the same time, however, the centralised nature of most Pakistani educational institutions, located predominantly in metropoles, combined with increasing expectations for middle-class women's education (Khoja-Moolji 2017; Khurshid 2017) means that a growing number of Pakistani women spend a portion of their life living away from family in order to complete their studies.

Hostels in urban centres offer migrant women the possibility of accessing work and education, while maintaining respectability through accommodation in a single-sex boarding house environment. Records of hostels date to the 19th century in South Asia and figure as part of accommodation arrangements for colonial educational, military, and charitable institutions; much of the vocabulary attached to hostels, including the English words "warden" for the hostel authority figure

and "mess" to describe catering arrangements, has a distinctly institutional air. Historically, hostels were largely attached to colleges, charitable or public institutions (Bruce 1933; Maskiell 1984; Minault 1999), but in recent years, the private sector has become more significant in the provision of hostel accommodation.

Although hostels exist for male as well as female migrants, there are distinct differences in their configurations. Boys' hostels, unlike girls' hostels, commonly included space for parking motorcycles and scooters, reflecting gendered norms of transport use, and were commonly advertised as open at all hours, whereas girls' hostels in Lahore usually had rather limited opening hours and strict curfews. Girls' hostels were frequently characterised by marked practices of surveillance and securitisation, with architectural features such as high walls, glass-topped boundaries, and security cameras creating highly boundaried spaces (Gupta 2020; Krishnan 2019; Pothukuchi 2001). An emphasis on gendered protection was reflected even in the names of girls' hostels. While boys' hostels often had names like "Executive", "Superior", "Professional", and "Luxury", suggestive of aspirations towards career and financial success, girls' hostels frequently bore names centring on themes of safety and protection—"Secure", "Haven", "al Haram" (the Protected Zone), and "al Hafiz" (the Protector). Moreover, female hostel residents were almost always referred to as "hostel girls", despite possessing many of the markers of adulthood such as age of majority, advanced education, or responsible jobs. These features reflect the perception of women living apart from their families as vulnerable and incapable of protecting themselves, hence requiring care and protection by responsible authorities within a secure environment. Throughout this article, female hostel residents are generally referred to as "hostel girls", both to reflect vernacular usage and to keep these connotations of dependency and vulnerability in mind.

Literature Review: Safety Work, Safer Spaces, and Hostels

Cartographies of women's fear often focus on the urban landscape as the spatial manifestation of patriarchy (Kalms 2024), and a substantial body of literature emphasises the hostility of cities that have been designed principally for male users, unreflective of women's needs and the lived experience of gender-based violence within urban spaces (Day 1999; Koskela and Pain 2000; Phadke 2005; Valentine 1989). To describe women's responses to the fear of male violence in public space, Vera-Gray draws on Kelly to develop the notion of "safety work", which she describes as the "thinking processes, decision-making and embodied watchfulness" women use (Kelly 2017:xi, quoted in Vera-Gray 2018:14); in short, the energy that women spend planning, amending, and strategising their access to public spaces to prevent violence happening (see also Fileborn 2016; Kelly 1988; Stanko 1997; Vera-Gray 2017). Noting that many safekeeping strategies focus on virtue maintenance rather than immediate physical safety, Lennox (2022:664) argues that these strategies nevertheless safeguard women,

allowing them to be in public space while also establishing themselves as compliant with norms of feminine behaviour.

Studies of safety work, like Lennox's work on virtue maintenance, have tended to focus on behaviour in public space (Fileborn and Hardley 2023; Vera-Gray 2017; Viswanath and Tandon Mehrotra 2007). However, this risks unintentionally perpetuating the assumption that the principal danger to women stems from strangers, and obscuring the extent to which forms of gendered safety work take place in other arenas. Research on the experiences of women survivors of domestic violence has revealed complex safety-making strategies used within the home to protect themselves and their children from violent cohabiters (Winfield et al. 2024; Women's Aid 2011; Zakar et al. 2012), as well as in fora such as the workplace (Masood 2019), online (Gillett 2023), and in interactions with police and justice systems (Lombard and Proctor 2025). Studies of purdah as a technique to manage relations between the self and others (Husain 2022; Masood 2019; Mirza 1999) offer a valuable indigenous counterpart to ideas of safety work, which have largely been developed in Western contexts. Against the focus on exclusively public spaces, techniques of purdah have been studied in semi-private and closed-door contexts such as offices (Mirza 1999), hospital staff-rooms (Masood 2019), and police interviews (Husain 2022, 2024), and are shown to be of use to women at risk of stigmatisation, who use purdah techniques to manage relations between the self and others.

Complementing research into strategies of safety work is a developing field of scholarly interest in the formation and maintenance of "safe spaces", providing a useful counterpoint to research on public space by exploring how safety is produced and maintained in private and boundaried spaces. In their theoretical overview, The Roestone Collective (2014) caution against viewing safety or danger acontextually, or as a static attribute of defined arenas, recalling Massey's (2005) resistance to the essentialisation of space as fixed and internally coherent. Instead, the Roestone Collective emphasise the importance of attending to the relational work of cultivating safety, in order to understand how different kinds of space become safe, and for whom. As some scholars have noted, safe spaces can act as places where freedom *to* is available as well as freedom *from*. Thus, Nasr (2024) describes how a safe space in Lebanon offers displaced Syrian women and girls an opportunity for emotional recovery; Bowstead (2019) shows how domestic violence refuges in the UK offer women "more-than-safety" through community and empowerment; and Dlugatch (2021) argues that safe spaces create the possibility for feminist subaltern counterpublics for cultural critique and debate. On the other hand, supposedly "safe" spaces can also manifest as places of unfreedom, where inmates are deprived of autonomy and mobility (Graham and Brickell 2019; Guha 2019). Safe spaces may also redirect and intensify forms of oppression, such as in refuges where women of colour are subjected to racism by white co-residents (Burman et al. 2004), or through punitive surveillance and carceral living conditions within women's hostels in South Asia (Krishnan 2019; Melkote and Tharu 1983; Pothukuchi 2001). As Ortega-Alcázar and Wilkinson (2021) show in their study of housing in the UK, young women do not experience the shared

accommodation they are able to access as a place of safety. Rather, shared accommodation is experienced as a place of fearfulness and vulnerability, as housing rather than home.

Exploring the relational work of creating safety prompts consideration of who, or what, is considered safe or dangerous, and how this impacts habitation of or movement through different kinds of space. Sara Ahmed (2014) argues that fear impacts mobility in space by allowing some bodies to move without restriction at the expense of others, and Stengel (2010:532) draws on Ahmed to argue that safe spaces may confine vulnerable people while those from whom they are at risk can move freely. As an example, Stengel cites the existence of mid-20th century parietal rules on US college campuses, which limited women's mobility in the name of protection from male predation; contemporary parallels are found at women's hostels in India, where women students are placed under highly restrictive curfews and surveillance (Gupta 2020; Roy 2016; Zahan 2020). However, such restrictions could also be taken as evidence that female sexual autonomy is considered more threatening and fearful to social norms than male predation. While the latter is construed as naturalised and inevitable, female sexuality threatens patriarchal structures and is feared, disciplined, and regulated (Guha 2019; Phadke 2005; Zia 2017), extending into backlash against feminist movements (Sadaf and Siitonen 2022; Zia 2022) as well as extreme forms of violence (Rizwan 2022). Moreover, the intersection of factors including race, sexuality, class, and religion (Crenshaw and Jaggar 1994) also impacts women's relationship to safety and danger, constructing some women as innocent victims of male violence and others as legitimate targets thereof (e.g. Dey 2018; Lennox 2022; Parikh 2018). These complexities complicate a generalised portrayal of urban life as hazardous to women as a homogeneous group (cf. Mohanty 2003), calling for nuanced explorations of how particular groups of women experience safety and danger as they move between public space and so-called safe spaces.

Methods

From 2019 to 2020, I lived in a privately run hostel in Lahore while carrying out doctoral fieldwork on gendered experiences of urban transformation. I received permission from the hostel warden to live in the hostel as part of my research, and my status as a researcher was known to all the hostel residents, to whom I explained the purpose of my research before requesting their consent for participation. Women living in my hostel were largely from rural villages and provincial towns in Punjab, and of a newly middle-class background that meant that, while their families were sufficiently wealthy to ensure their daughters could achieve higher education, they were usually the first in their families to go to university or to live away from home in order to study. Punjabi or Seraiki was most women's first language; they all spoke Urdu fluently, which was the main language used in the hostel and during my research. In total, 22 different hostel residents, aged between 18 and 40, contributed to the findings in this paper. Nineteen were from the Punjab province in Pakistan; two, Purveen and Durnaz, were from

Balochistan; and one, Tabassum, was from the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province. Twenty-one women were Muslim and one, Sayma, was Christian. Fourteen were students at the time of research and eight had full-time jobs, but the boundaries between students and working women were blurred since several students held part-time jobs and all the working women had originally come to Lahore in order to study. All names are pseudonyms and identifying details have been obscured.

Living in the hostel alongside the other residents, sharing a bedroom, a bathroom, common spaces, and daily meals, became an exercise in the classical anthropological technique of participant observation. My own identity as a foreign-born, albeit Pakistani-origin, research student became an unanticipated analytical tool in my research practice, since it meant that I was viewed with concern as a naive foreign student who did not understand how to keep herself safe. Initially, I found this galling, but as time went on, I realised that this projected vulnerability was a valuable ice-breaker in my relationships within the hostel. Girls who would normally keep themselves distant from strangers wanted to find out what I was doing in Lahore and would give me advice about how to avoid danger. These conversations became a source of insight into some of the themes that I discuss in this thesis. My research methods never involved formalised interviews or focus group discussions; instead, all the data upon which this paper is based was gathered during everyday observations and conversations, which I would later note down as exactly as I could. On my return from fieldwork, I thematically coded my fieldnotes, using NVivo to collate observations around emergent themes.

Findings

The City as Unsafe Space

> When I first came to Lahore, I cried and cried. I was scared on the roads … I thought, how can I manage without my family? (Samayya, 24, student)

Kirmani (2020) criticises the portrayal of cities, particularly those in the Global South, as dangerous, noting that this characterisation frequently elides other aspects of urban life, such as fun, comfort, and adventure. While Kirmani's critique offers a valuable counterpoint to totalising depictions of cities, the fact that her ethnography of the Lyari neighbourhood of Karachi depicts the experiences of young women who have grown up in the area, and who regard it as home, demonstrates the importance of an intersectional approach to gendered space and mobility. Hostel girls who had moved from rural parts of Pakistan to Lahore had a very different view of the city. Lahore was disparaged as too big, noisy, dirty, and dangerous, unlike the clean and pure surroundings of girls' rural homes; this contrast was projected onto the people as well as the environments, with villagers viewed as honest, simple, and straightforward (*seedha-saaf*), and city-dwellers considered to be cunning (*chalaak*) and fast (*tez*), intent upon exploiting unwary rural migrants.

> 95% of the girls who come from backward areas are very simple and innocent. They don't know how to fight, and they get a lot of stress and tension because they come to Lahore and they feel like everyone is trying to cheat them. (Kulsoom, 23, student)

While expressions of dislike for city life may have been a covert assertion of moral uprightness, demonstrating that girls had not been seduced by the splendours and possibilities of the city, hostel girls genuinely seemed to fear the possibility of harm as a result of life among strangers. Much of the danger thought to be facing hostel girls stemmed from unrelated men, who were conceptualised as sexually aggressive and a ubiquitous threat to women. Because of their youth, lack of familial support in the city, and rural origin, hostel girls were considered to be particularly easy prey for rapacious men:

> Men in Pakistan are very dangerous. If a woman goes to the police here, he will look at her in a nasty way. He will first want to have sex with her and then will help her. This is how things are here … Even myself, when I was a Bachelors, I had a professor —I still remember his name—who harassed me … [E]very girl has to deal with these things. (Miss Nazia, 30s, hostel warden)

Despite the dangers of urban life, most hostel girls were committed to its continuation in order to achieve their educational and career aspirations, and drew on a variety of strategies to minimise their own perceived risk while living in the city. Most chose to travel in privately booked rickshaws or taxis rather than on public transport, despite the higher cost; when moving through public space in Lahore, hostel girls moved swiftly and purposefully without lingering or making eye contact, travelling within a "bubble of private respectability" (Phadke et al. 2011:179). Girls also circumscribed their own mobility, avoiding leaving the hostel after dark or coming back late: "Hostels have this reputation for girls who are loose, easy. If you take a taxi in odd hours, the driver may think you are one of those girls" (Miss Nazia, 30s, hostel warden).

These types of labour, Vera-Gray argues, become "habitual, sometimes unconscious" embodied and behavioural strategies (Vera-Gray 2018:5), part of the "routine safekeeping" (Lennox 2022:642) that women do in their navigation of male-dominated public space. As a boundaried, single-sex space under the oversight of a resident warden, hostel accommodation was considered another key strategy for migrant women's safety in urban centres. However, while hostels promised protection against the threat of male sexual predation, girls found that residence exposed them to the possibility of other types of harm, rooted in the surroundings and organisation of the hostel itself. Managing these risks required bodily and interpersonal forms of labour strongly reminiscent of Vera-Gray's (2018) descriptions of safety work, thus complicating views of safety work as occurring solely in public space.

"Hostel life has made me sick": Bodily Harm Resulting from Hostel Residence

Zakiya (24, office worker) remembered wistfully that when she had first come to Lahore as an 18-year-old, she had been "healthy-looking", with a firm, strong

body and glowing skin. She used the mirror function on her phone to point out to me the hollows under her eyes, and demonstrated how her old clothes hung off her frame. In Zakiya's opinion, the deterioration in her health was due to living in hostels:

> In the first hostel I lived in, food was prepared twice a day. The rice would stand for hours on the table and girls would come to help themselves. I became ill twice while I was living there; I went to hospital and was placed on a drip. I moved from that hostel, but the next one I lived in had contaminated water. I became very ill again living there. In hostels you are cold in the winter and hot in the summer, and no one cares as long as you are paying your money. We are always being tormented by mosquitoes. Hostel life has made me sick. (Zakiya, 24, office worker)

As Zakiya's story indicates, hostel girls frequently encountered poor living conditions. Pest infestations were common, and food hygiene was a particular source of concern, with many girls experiencing food poisoning at least once during their hostel residence. Hamida (22, student) recalled having food poisoning three times in her first hostel and being hospitalised with severe dehydration. Moreover, her hostel warden had denied all culpability and had even suggested that Hamida was lying: "[The warden] said: 'Everyone else is fine, you are the only one that is complaining'" (Hamida, 22, student).

Hamida's experience tallied closely with the testimony of a male student from a public university hostel:

> In my university hostel there is one working water cooler out of three. 70% of students have typhoid or hepatitis. The university administration doesn't admit responsibility. They said, "Students are using the washroom without washing their hands, or eating bad food in Anarkali, that's why they're getting sick". (Adnan, 21, student)

Adnan's and Hamida's accounts of being disbelieved, and even blamed, for the health adversities they experienced connect with wider complaints about the lack of care within hostels. Girls spoke resentfully of feeling "eaten" (*khaya gya*) by their wardens, who were mean (*kanjoos*), cunning (*chalaak*), and intent on maximising profit. They described how charges for the pettiest reasons, such as an extra cup of tea, were routinely added to monthly bills, while other services they paid for, such as hot water or regular cleaning, failed to materialise. Several scholars note historical descriptions of hostels as familial, homely environments (Husain 2011; Maskiell 1984; Minault 1999), and private hostels in Lahore often presented themselves as homely spaces with the tagline "a home away from home type atmosphere" (*ghar ke bahir ghar jaisa mahaul*). Hostel girls, however, articulated a distinction between the familial home, which was imagined as a place characterised by freely given care and affection, and the hostel, where care was not only transactional, but inadequate in comparison to its cost; following Ortega-Alcázar and Wilkinson's (2021) useful distinction, as housing rather than as home.

Hamida ultimately decided to sacrifice her deposit in order to move to another hostel immediately, feeling she could not risk another illness by remaining in the

hostel till the end of her month's notice period. Other girls, who could not afford to move out, found alternative ways of managing their vulnerability to illness. Many kept stores of non-perishable food in their rooms and exercised great caution over what they ate; some refused to eat the hostel-supplied food at all, instead eating only one meal a day at their universities or workplaces. Hostel girls' strategies in managing what they took into their bodies recall Husain's (2022) identification of bodily privation as a strategy of purdah, denying oneself food and drink in order to avoid the indignities and dangers of being in public with a female body. However, whereas Husain's interlocutors adjusted their bodily intakes to avoid the risk of needing to urinate or defecate in places without adequate female toilet facilities, the bodily privations of hostel girls reflected mistrust of the food and drink they had been offered, expressing a wider sense of unsafety in the hostel environment.

"She wanted to degrade us": The Hostel Warden

One of the supposed protections of hostel life was the presence and supervision of the hostel warden, typically an older woman, who lived onsite. As a figure embodying both care and control, the warden was expected to act in loco parentis to hostel girls, and her oversight was considered by parents as a safeguard against urban dangers. It was striking, therefore, to note the extent to which girls experienced the warden herself as a threat. Girls described wardens as tyrannical, intrusive, and verbally abusive, chiming with depictions of hostel wardens as excessively surveilling and restrictive (Kurian 2023; Roy 2016; Zahan 2020).

Guha (2019) notes that suspicion of adolescent female sexual autonomy underlies much of the authoritarian regulation of a "child marriage victim" shelter in eastern India. In my fieldwork, however, I found that the insulting treatment experienced by hostel girls was also related to their presumed youth, ambiguous status as consumers, and their rural origin, as well as to a stigmatised female sexuality. Hostel wardens presented themselves as mature and experienced authority figures, and hostel girls as inexperienced dependents who ought to be grateful for what they received. Girls who challenged this expectation by regarding themselves as consumers rather than dependents, and demanding the services they had paid for, were labelled demanding and ungrateful:

> In my hostel today there was no electricity for eight hours, from 8 am to 4 pm. So I was calling [the warden] and she didn't pick up, and so I was messaging her—you can see the messages. She told me, "Have patience", and I replied, "Please tell me, what has patience to do with this", and she became so rude, I couldn't believe her language. She told me that "You girls pay your rent and then you expect every problem to be sorted out in one day … now you are leaving in a few days so this is the last day of having to listen to your complaints" … I think she was so rude to me because she knows I am leaving, I have paid my dues, there is nothing more for her to get from me. (Sara, 25, teacher)

The rural origin and presumed unsophistication of many hostel girls also factored into hostel wardens' contemptuous treatment, as they asserted urban superiority over rural ignorance. Some girls, like Samayya, felt that their rural origins were targeted for hostility:

> When I first came to Lahore I lived in the hostel of my teacher … One night the power went out. I tried the switch but it was off, so I went to sleep in the dark. Later when the power came on, the light turned on again. And she woke me up and called me such horrible names. She said I was backward, ignorant, uneducated (*pindu*, *jahil*, *anparh*). I lay awake half the night crying. (Samayya, 24, student)

Durnaz recalled a humiliating experience in her first term in a university hostel. Like many other girls, Durnaz had grown up using a "squat toilet" rather than a Western sitting-style toilet. When one of the hostel washrooms was found soiled, the warden called the girls together and implied that one of the rural-origin girls was responsible because of their lack of habituation with Western-style toilets:

> In my first semester the hostel warden called us all together and said … "All you girls come and look at the washroom. Who has done it? I know who has done it." I was not going in there and she called me and said, "You also, you come and see this. This is how you girls use washrooms!" … She wanted to degrade us. (Durnaz, 24, student)

The warden's integral role within the hostel, behind the boundaried lines separating the hostel from the outside world, meant that she was able to pass throughout the hostel without restraint, and hostel girls had little respite from daily encounters with her. Indeed, Malalai suspected Miss Nazia of having gone into Malalai's room to look through her possessions, and despite feeling that her privacy had been invaded, accepted that neither Miss Nazia nor her own parents would have much sympathy with a complaint; Miss Nazia's role as a quasi-parental figure meant that she had the right to inspect hostel girls' rooms and belongings, and Malalai's protests would be construed as evidence of having something illegitimate to hide.

With little escape from the warden's oversight, hostel girls developed strategies to minimise conflict and protect themselves from her scrutiny. Malalai, like other girls, began to take her personal possessions everywhere with her, rather than leaving them in her room; other girls hid things carefully among their clothes and belongings to avoid them being found. Corresponding with Husain's (2022:166) description of "veiling in self-defence", employing subterfuge and not expressing her full opinions in her interactions with hostile police officers as a technique of purdah, hostel girls altered their behaviour with the warden by becoming guarded in what they revealed in conversation, and by performing subservience through flattery and appeasement. Purveen (26, student) cynically described her relationship with her hostel warden as "I do a lot of *ji-huzoori* (yes sir, yes sir). I have to lick her balls". Behaviour intended to reduce the likelihood of abuse through appeasement, sometimes described as a fawning response (Woolard 2023), is commonly observed in relationships of interpersonal violence,

including domestic abuse. Strategies of fawning and appeasement in hostels reflect the findings of Burman et al. (2004) and Cuomo (2019), that supposedly safe spaces may still encapsulate relationships of interpersonal danger.

"Where is my security?": Surveillance and Its Lack

Hostel life was often characterised by a high degree of surveillance of girls' everyday activities, reflecting a double set of anxieties: one about potential incursions from outside to inside, and the other about what women might do with unregulated freedom of movement. In the hostel in which I lived, five security cameras covered the hostel's three floors, with one constantly pointed at the street entrance and the other four recording internal communal spaces. In other hostels, girls were required to provide a signed permission slip to document their comings and goings every time they left the building:

> The rules are very restrictive … Every time you come in or go out you have to sign a slip, everywhere you go you have to give a permission slip. It is not just because they are worried about what parents will say but because a girl who keeps roaming about (*ghumti rehti hai*) will spoil the establishment. So, if they think she is moving too freely, they will give her a warning, and then she will have to leave. (Mahwish, 23, nurse)

Attitudes to these practices of surveillance were ambivalent. On the one hand, girls often resented the infantilising restriction they experienced. At the same time, however, to date no resident-led movement resisting hostel surveillance and carcerality has arisen in Pakistan to parallel the India *Pinjra Tod* (Break the Cage) movement, which challenges gendered restrictions in women's hostels (Kurian 2023; Roy 2016; Zahan 2020). I found that hostel girls actively sought out hostels with surveillance cameras and where onsite workers kept track of who came in and went out. In fact, Ambaa (18, student) criticised her hostel warden for not being surveillant enough. To get to her college in time for her first class, she frequently left the hostel before any of the staff had appeared. Chagrined by what she considered a lack of appropriate attention to her safety, she complained:

> I went to the warden and I told her, "Do you know that I am leaving every day? Have you checked your security cameras? Shouldn't there be some guard to watch me go? Where is my security? Did you even know that I am leaving every morning before anyone gets up?" She said, "Yes child, I knew." But she did not know. Why was the gate locked every morning? What rubbish. (Ambaa, 18, student)

These contrasting attitudes to surveillance demonstrated hostel girls' own awareness of, and responses to, the double set of anxieties about security in the hostel and in the city more widely. The experience of the city as a dangerous place, and the fear of malevolent male intruders, rendered hostels with security cameras and surveillance measures more appealing as a way of safeguarding women from male stranger violences. But security measures were also envisaged as protective

against danger from within the hostel: both the risk of theft or violence at the hands of other hostel girls, and against the danger of oneself being accused of suspect or immoral behaviour. Girls could point to camera evidence of their behaviour within the hostel as evidence of their status as virtuous "risk-averse subjects" (Lennox 2022:643) with nothing to fear from supervision. This strategy of hypervisibility, choosing to make oneself viewable to surveillance as a form of self-protection, contrasts with and extends Vera-Gray's (2018:102) observation of invisibility as a strategy of safety work that protects women from the male gaze. It also shows how the provision of freedom *from* and freedom *to* in so-called safe spaces (The Roestone Collective 2014) is not unambiguously celebrated, since freedom *to* is itself something that causes suspicion of hostel girls and which girls require protection from.

"There is no limitation placed on hostel girls": Other Hostel Residents as a Source of Danger

A central tension in hostel life stemmed from the hostel's nature as an ambiguously private space. Whereas homes were envisaged as the dwelling place solely of kin, hostels provided shared accommodation for strangers, coming from towns and villages across Pakistan (cf. Ortega-Alcázar and Wilkinson 2021). Residents might speak different dialects, follow different customs, and have dissimilar practices. Moreover, girls typically lived at close quarters; it was common for two, three, or four girls, previously unknown to each other, to share a single room and its attached washroom. This was a source of considerable worry for many girls. How could one know whether the other occupants of one's room were to be trusted? How could one feel safe eating, bathing, and sleeping alongside a stranger?

The anxiety attached to other residents resulted in large part from the generalised suspicion of girls living away from home, who were imagined to be free to embark upon morally unacceptable behaviour like drinking, smoking, or extramarital sex. Such constructions draw on well-established tropes about the danger posed by wilful, unruly, or "bad" women (Charania 2021; Husain 2024; Khan 2003; Zia 2022), and led to hostel girls viewing each other as potential threats:

> Living in a hostel is very stressful because of the other girls. Girls come from a long way away and they have very strict families, so they don't go out or do much, but when they come to the hostel there are no restrictions, so they go bad. (Hamida, 22, student)

> There is worry that hostel girls don't have limitations placed on them … At home, parents know everything about their daughter's friends … parents can tell her and guide her what is good and bad; they can keep a check on her. In a hostel, parents don't get the chance to tell her what is good or bad; she will only know what her friends will tell her. She is free to go where and when she wants; her friends may misguide her. She also may get to know boys, and the intentions of boys are not always sincere. (Malalai, 30s, telesales worker)

To protect themselves from suspect others in their environments, hostel girls drew on a range of bodily, behavioural, and material strategies, such as avoiding eye contact and conversation, creating barriers with technology and physical objects, and avoiding proximity and emotional intimacy. While these bear similarities to the strategies of safety work used by women in public space to protect themselves from male violence (Parikh 2018; Phadke 2005; Vera-Gray 2018), hostel girls' strategies occurred in an explicitly single-sex and ambiguously private space, and were enacted against other women. Like the women office workers studied by Mirza (1999:194), who created "social distance" from male colleagues, hostel girls largely avoided socialising with fellow residents, keeping conversation brief, distant, and formulaic. Recalling how Vera-Gray (2018:100) describes women using electronic devices in public space to "[disappear] into yourself when you cannot disappear from the world, to block off or segment yourself from your surroundings", many girls used smartphones as barriers to conversation. In communal space, they plugged headphones in and looked at their screens to avoid eye contact with others; in bedrooms at night, after the main light had been switched off, the tiny screens would glow silently as each girl shut herself off into her own digital world.

Studies of purdah, which translates as "curtain", often emphasise the centrality of spatial segregation through practices such as sitting separately or appropriating formerly shared spaces as single sex (e.g., Masood 2019; Mirza 1999). In the hostel, where bedrooms were shared by multiple girls, physical objects were sometimes transformed into material barriers between residents. Zeyneb (24, office worker), who used to share a room with a double bed, remembered that "We would put pillows down the middle of the bed when we went to sleep, and lie with our backs to each other". Similarly, Tabassum (25, doctor) used pillows to block herself from her roommate's view when she wanted privacy. Gauria (21, student), who shared a room with two other girls, carefully curated the space around her bed so that she could access her stores of food and water, her backpack and clean clothes, and a charging point for her phone, without ever leaving her bed or having to approach her roommates. Beyond physical separation, girls sought to cultivate emotional distance from each other, reflecting the perceived untrustworthiness of hostel girls:

> If you are reserved, no one can hurt you. Get to know someone, see if they can be trusted. Don't tell anyone anything about yourself; you never know the intentions of people. There is a danger with girls of gossiping, and rumours. (Sara, 24, teacher)

> You should have no expectations from a relationship. Girls make relationships too fast and then they quarrel—one complains that the other shut the cupboard door while she was trying to sleep. It's better to have distance; not to expect too much. (Tabassum, 25, doctor)

Maintaining one's reserve was a particularly important strategy for two girls who felt themselves to be "other" in their hostels. Durnaz (24, student) complained that her hostelmates and warden had mocked her accent and stigmatised her as

a Balochi "tribal". To reduce her exposure to such stigma, she found she was speaking less in public and with her roommates, to avoid them commenting on her accent. Sayma (24, nurse), one of the few Christian nurses living in a large hospital hostel, often worried that an antagonistic hostelmate might accuse her of blasphemy, an accusation carrying potentially fatal consequences. Reflecting observations of minoritised women experiencing heightened risks of violence (Day 1999; Vera-Gray 2017), Sayma's lived sense of her own precarity increased her reserve and anxiety around her roommates.

"If I told my parents what has happened, they would make me come back": Virtue Maintenance through Secret-Keeping

When Samayya (24, student) first came to Lahore, she was followed in the street and repeatedly propositioned by a male stranger. She had been afraid to go back to her hostel, not only because she feared her harasser learning where she lived but also because she anticipated that the hostel warden would think the worst of her. Instead, she had taken refuge in a shopping mall for over an hour, hiding in the toilets and waiting for the man to go.

Samayya's experience and her response demonstrate how safety, danger, and protection are assessed across multiple measures, chiming with Lennox's (2022:657) observation that many of the strategies used by women in public space "were not dominantly about individual-level physical safety", but rather about asserting women's status as virtuous subjects. For Samayya, increasing her physical safety by returning to the hostel risked precipitating a different kind of danger through reputational damage. If her warden began to consider her a "bad girl", she might treat Samayya badly or eject her from the hostel; she might also call Samayya's parents to complain about her supposedly immoral behaviour, which would probably lead to Samayya being removed from university. Samayya's need to protect her own virtue led to her experiencing both the wider environment of the city and the hostel as unsafe—the former because of the possibility of repeated sexual harassment, and the latter because of the threat of reputational damage and eviction. Patriarchal relations thus extended across both public and private space in the city, rendering migrant women unsafe in different spaces.

Girls tended to manage these conflicting forms of danger through keeping large parts of their lives secret from others. For example, when Zakiya's (24, office worker) paycheque was late arriving one month, the rent that she owed to the hostel became a source of tension and led to Miss Nazia publicly chastising her. Zakiya felt deeply insulted and complained that if she had the money, she would leave the hostel immediately.

"Can you ask your parents to send you some money until your pay arrives?", I asked her. She replied:

> No. If I told my parents what has happened, they would send me the money, but they would make me come back. They only let me be here because I am supporting

> myself. If I tell them about this matter my father will say, "Why are you in Lahore?" He will compel me to come back. And I can't get a job there. So I can't tell them. (Zakiya, 24, office worker)

Samayya and Zakiya both weighed up the harm they had experienced against another danger that they anticipated—the theft of their desired futures. Making their experiences known risked their parents losing trust in their ability to live alone, effectively erasing their chances of education and employment. Their response was to keep secret the harassment they were enduring, interpreting the threat of stranger harassment and bullying from the warden as preferable to the risk of reputational damage. The compromises and enforced secret-keeping of hostel girls demonstrate the importance of conceptualising gendered threat beyond "stranger danger" narratives of sexual and physical violence, to include assaults on reputation and the ability to pursue educational and career aspirations.

"Every hostel has problems, so it might not be a good idea to shift": The Limitations of Moving as Empowerment

During the period in which I was conducting fieldwork, the possibilities for gendered accommodation in Lahore appeared to be expanding through a rapid increase in private hostels. On my first visit to the neighbour of my hostel in February 2019, there were an estimated 25 hostels in the area; by November 2019, this figure had risen to 40, and when I carried out a digital survey of the area in March 2022, I made a list of 52 hostels and a further 76 in the neighbouring housing society. Samayya (24, student) reflected in 2020 that:

> These days, the hostel seems very empty. There are a lot of hostels opening in this area. Before there was a lot of *rush*, there were few hostels and so there were a lot of girls. Nowadays there are a lot of hostels and there are few girls.

The increase in hostels seemed to give hostel girls a new strategy for safety work and an increased sense of power as a consumer. Girls would declare that if they were not well treated in their hostels, they would simply find another; they did not have to endure poor food or humiliating treatment, because they could look around for a better option:

> There are hostels where we can pay 8,000 and get three times mess. We are here just for the food. This is very far from my hospital, why should I be here? If we are not going to get good food, then we will just go. (Tabassum, 25, doctor)

During my fieldwork, I sometimes accompanied girls as they went to view different hostels. However, despite generally expressed dissatisfaction in their living arrangements, and the availability of alternative accommodation options, few girls elected to move. Most felt that one could know little about a hostel from just visiting; it was possible that in a new hostel, conditions might be even worse (e.g. Najam 2016; Shirazi and Asghar 2018). Discussions of the unknowability of

strange hostels recalled narratives of "pervasive male stranger danger" (Lennox 2022:649–650), where the possibility of harm is conceptualised as ubiquitous and inescapable, and frequently resulted in girls choosing to stay where the disadvantages were already known:

> My father says, "My child, change to some other hostel if you don't like it." But how can I change? When do I have the time to change? I don't have time to go around looking at different hostels. I can at least eat the food here without it making me sick, and the security is quite good. Because of the cameras there isn't thievery. For me, the most important thing is the food. I need to be able to eat without getting sick, I need to be able to get three meals a day, otherwise I cannot work. (Tabassum, 25, doctor)

Reservations about moving also reflected the pressures of virtue maintenance work. Should the new hostel be insecure or morally suspect, girls feared that they would be presumed to have actively sought such an environment out because of their own moral laxity. Girls' immobility reflected their sense of emplacement within a wider environment of danger, from which no refuge could easily be anticipated.

Conclusion

Girls' hostels in urban Pakistan are considered a means of keeping rural-to-urban female migrants protected from the threat of male sexual predation in the city. Yet, in taking up residence in these restrictive and securitised spaces, girls become exposed to other forms of danger, including physical depredation, financial exploitation, emotional bullying, and reputational risk. These banal (Gorringe 2006) or slow (Datta 2020; see also Nixon 2013) forms of violence are devalued in comparison to the danger perceived to stem from strange men, leading to situations where hostel girls are required to evaluate different kinds of suffering in deciding what and how much they can endure.

The privations in the name of safety that urban hostels offer female migrants reflect what Charania (2021:366) sees as the ultimate precarity of women's citizenship in Pakistan, which she describes as "reserved for idealised notions of disciplined femininity that are constructed around a constantly moving target". As a group, hostel girls were caught in a pernicious double bind, simultaneously infantilised as vulnerable minors and regarded with suspicion as potentially disruptive, morally lax women out of place outside the home. Marked by geographic origin, class status, and dialect as unused to city life, and by gender as out of place outside the home, hostel girls carried burdens of risk not experienced by their rural-origin brothers living in boys' hostels or by female classmates who lived with natal families in Lahore. Some girls, like Sayma (24, nurse) or Durnaz (24, student), bore additional burdens of vulnerability related to their religious or ethnic identities, indicating the importance of an intersectional understanding of oppression (Crenshaw and Jaggar 1994). The view of hostel girls as both vulnerable to danger and as potential sources of social disorder leads to the imposition of

control as well as care to regulate their behaviour. Moreover, while hostels are presented as a way to protect women against male violence, much of the control and privation inflicted upon hostel girls flows from a suspicion of female sexual autonomy that is continuous with the extreme forms of gender-based violence and murder justified by the need to control female sexuality (e.g. Rizwan 2022). From this perspective, hostels might temporarily shelter women from forms of gender-based violence, but their very existence works to justify and maintain the narratives and ideologies that threaten women.

Experiences of hostels as hazardous contribute to feminist critiques of domestic or private space as supposedly safer for women. While restriction to private space is a frequent authoritarian response to gender-based violence (see Smith 2013), global data on increased domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Pattojoshi et al. 2021) have demonstrated that restricting women to private space, even in the name of safety, may mean imprisoning them in spaces of danger. The fact that an increase in hostels in Lahore has not been accompanied by an improvement in conditions shows that market-based solutions are not sufficient for ensuring residents' wellbeing. Calls for increasing women's safety by making public space more inclusive (e.g. Kalms 2024; Phadke et al. 2011) offer one possible solution to gender-based violence, but must be nuanced by resisting the classification of safety or danger as a function of public or private space itself. Hostel girls experience danger not simply because of the spaces they inhabit, but because of their embodied stigma and vulnerabilities. Rather than locating safety and danger as static and acontextual functions of bounded spaces, efforts to increase women's safety need to address patriarchal values and gendered norms that restrict women's options and maintain gendered forms of danger, even in supposedly "safe" spaces.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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