



WHEN MEN DO CARE: Masculinity and Labor in Northwest Pakistan

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Ghaffar had permanently returned to his village in Mardan District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, after having worked in Saudi Arabia for most of his adult life. While he was away, Ghaffar and his parents had asked Firoze, Ghaffar's youngest brother, to stay back in the village to take care of the household, nine acres of ancestral land, and reciprocal obligations with their kin. When Ghaffar permanently returned from Saudi, he built a new two-story house, which stood out against a few one-story houses on one side, and green fields on the other. He also initiated the process of separating the household's joint assets with the help of a group of male elders who formed an informal temporary decision-making body (*jirga*). Following custom, every brother brings all his assets to the table, and the elders divide them equally. One of the elders remarked that unlike many of the other household asset divisions he had overseen in the village, in this case it was clear that Ghaffar had concealed a lot his assets in the form of property in a nearby city. Ghaffar offered Firoze 8,000,000 PKR (\$65,000 USD) and ownership of their ancestral house, in addition to his entitlement of the share in their ancestral land. Firoze refused. Like many other brothers in his position, he claimed that he was owed half of his migrant brother's assets. The dispute went to court, and their ancestral land was put under a moratorium. Ultimately,

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Firoze did not have the money to fight Ghaffar in court and was forced to accept the offer. Firoze recounted why Ghaffar refused to give him his rightful share. The following paragraph paraphrases Firoze's account.

* * *

Ghaffar told me that he didn't owe me an equal share because he had earned it in Saudi with his toil (*mehnat*). This was unfair because Ghaffar didn't follow the centuries-old Pukhtun custom of equal divisions of assets between brothers. Ghaffar didn't see that for Pukhtuns, when a man leaves to earn money somewhere else, he needs another man to stay in the village and take care of the household. He needs a man to stay in case a feud [over land or women] happens. He needs him to bury their kin. The brother takes care of all these things while the migrant doesn't know what is going on in the village and is earning tens of millions there. Migrants could only go abroad because the household paid for them. We stayed and worked here and did the work of putting people in graves and did reciprocal obligations with kin. He didn't come back for any of that. He bought shares in companies, plots [of real estate], built a two-story house, and sells jaggery and wheat.

This trend of unequal divisions between brothers is made by capitalism (*sarmayadari nizam*). We used to say, "even if we only have one onion plant, we divide it equally." Capitalism is destroying this system of equal divisions. In this new way of thinking, people say, I spent forty years making money. It's mine. I did this on my own. I gave my time and labor. In the old way of thinking, people would say, I spent forty years away on your head, without which I couldn't have done waged labor (*mazdoori*). I did this with your help because you were taking care of the household, fulfilling reciprocal obligations, and taking care of the land. It wasn't just my time and labor; you also toiled (*mehnat*). Those with paper money think they are better than those who don't have it. They don't think that the brother toiled and did *duty* (salaried job), and that's why I have the money I have.

* * *

Later that evening, I thought about the similarities between Firoze's claim and the Wages for Housework campaign led by feminists in the 1970s in Europe, United States, and Canada (Dalla Costa and James 1972; Federici 1975). The campaign argued that women's unpaid housework, what we now call care labor, enabled the waged worker to sell his labor in the market and produce profits for capitalists. By demanding wages for women's housework, feminists wanted recognition for housework as labor and sought to demystify capital's reliance on

women's unpaid labor. Similarly, Firoze argued that his brother would have recognized and compensated his work of taking care of the household, kinship obligations, and land if he had upheld past customary norms of reciprocity between brothers, instead of being seduced by the aura of money and capitalist values of individualism.

While the Wages for Housework campaign did not succeed at getting wages for women's domestic labor, its analytical contributions have had a lasting impact on how feminists understand domestic labor in relation to waged labor. In a recent revival of this conversation under the banner of social reproduction theory (Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2014), the scope of social reproductive labor has been broadened beyond housework and the family. Social reproduction is defined as the "forms of provisioning, caregiving, and interaction that produce and maintain social bonds" (Fraser 2014, 61). It is just as much about birthing and socializing the young as it is about "building communities, and sustaining shared meanings, affective dispositions, and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation." Social reproduction is integrally related to capitalist dynamics of production. In Euro-America, every conjuncture of capitalist production has come with its own distinct set of relations of social reproduction (Fraser 2016). Most starkly, the development of capitalism spurred the relegation of social reproduction into a privatized, feminized sphere of the family, separate from the public and masculinized sphere of the market (Federici 2004; Fraser 2016). While the processes of social reproduction and production are integrally related, they are also ridden with contradictions that result in a perpetual crisis between the two.

Amid these contradictions, people constantly struggle over delimiting the boundary between what they see as different spheres of the economy and society, or work and the family (Fraser 2014). These "boundary struggles," Fraser argues, are just as important as class struggles, because they shape capitalist society and the everyday politics against it. The Wages for Housework campaign was one such boundary struggle that sought to collapse the conceptual and political boundaries between the capitalist economy and the family by making women's unpaid housework economically and thus politically commensurate with men's waged labor. Firoze's conflict with his brother Ghaffar also constitutes a boundary struggle. By making his care labor commensurate with the migrant brother's waged labor, Firoze challenges what he considers the devaluation of the labor of taking care of the household, kinship obligations, and land in a new migrant economy. In the Global South, a growing number of men like Firoze can no longer subsist from agrarian livelihoods and are unable to realize the dream of getting a "proper job."

Not only are these men unable to fulfil the role of the household's breadwinner but they have also become feminized dependents on kin still able to eke out a living (Ferguson 2015; Ferguson and Li 2018). Apart from some studies on how men who depend on their migrant wives navigate the emasculation of doing care labor (Kwon 2015; Parreñas 2010), insufficient attention has been paid to how men who depend on wage-earning kin seek recognition for their care labor.

Much of social reproduction theory's insights come from historical and contemporary examples from urban contexts in the Global North. This scholarship has convincingly argued that gender relations, along with race and class, are central dynamics of social reproduction because they shape how care labor and labor are exploited in Euro-American capitalist societies (Katz 2001). However, because of the theory's geographical focus, its assumed subject of inquiry is often an urban-dwelling working-class woman doing unpaid or underpaid care work in a nuclear family or workplace in an economy where waged labor is the dominant form. In contrast, a growing feminist scholarship on agrarian settings in the Global South (Jacka 2017; Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018; Shah and Lerche 2020; Mezzadri et al. 2024; Sajadian 2024) offers new insights into the "uneven and complex ways" (Levien et al. 2018) in which capitalism reconfigures social reproduction. In these settings, where waged labor is not the only means of making a living, the lines between social reproduction and production are blurry to begin with (Shah and Lerche 2020). This is especially the case for migrant households who straddle agrarian and urban settings, relying on complex household arrangements both to sell their labor and to socially reproduce the household (Jacka 2017). In addition to social reproduction theory's primary focus on gender relations (as they are co-constituted with class and race), ethnographically informed scholars from South Asia emphasize the role of kinship, that is, gender *and* generation (Shah and Lerche 2020) and caste (Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018) in social reproduction. By showing how kinship and caste, not just gender, prove central to changes in social reproduction and production, the article contributes to critiques of social reproduction theory emerging from agrarian settings in the Global South.

To understand how men who stay in the migrant-sending village seek recognition and compensation for their care labor, the article contextualizes their claims in two related and simultaneously shifting dynamics of production and social reproduction. As production shifts from a primary focus on agriculture to heavy reliance on transnational labor migration, the caste- and gender-based practices and meanings of labor change. In the process of social reproduction, when joint households become transnational, divisions of care labor and labor

shift, as do the kinship and gender hierarchies that constitute them. Amid these shifts, I argue that men seek recognition for their care labor by both renovating and resurrecting kinship, gender, and caste hierarchies that animate social reproduction and production. As men renovate caste-based meanings of labor, men in the village seek recognition for care as a form of labor by invoking their upper-caste history, while also conceding to the new meaning of labor. In doing so, however, they valorize their own care labor (what I call downward care) by neglecting junior women's care labor (what I call upward care). While men's struggles for recognition of care as labor resonate with feminist critiques of capitalism, they are aligned with both upper-caste patriarchy and capitalism. The article thus highlights the limits to the politics of recognition of care as labor. This research is based on sixteen months of ethnography in two migrant-sending villages in Mardan District in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018–2019.

TRANSNATIONAL FRATERNAL RECIPROCITY

Migrant-sending communities have long proved a fertile ground for scholarly analyses of the relationship between social reproduction and production (Meillassoux 1981). By geographically separating household members, migration generates new kinship arrangements with new divisions, practices, and meanings of labor and care labor, as well as new patterns of distribution (Coe 2011; Gardner 1995; Kwon 2015; Parreñas 2010). In Pakistan, neoliberal restructuring led to a decline in agricultural productivity, profitability, and standards of living, leading to a stagnation of the agricultural economy (Aftab and Ali 2023). The decline in state subsidies and output support for agriculture has squeezed farmers, forcing them to diversify incomes. As the Pakistani state facilitated the process of labor migration to the Gulf in the 1970s, peasant households facing a squeeze began to send men to labor abroad. Fifty years later, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, compared to the rest of the country, has the lowest local labor-force participation rate, the highest unemployment rate, and a higher proportion of the population below the poverty line.¹ The state, rather than devising a serious plan to bolster a sustainable economic development plan in the region, has continued to rely heavily on the spoils of the war economy and exporting labor. In one of the villages on which this ethnography is based, a majority of households, across classes and castes, had one or more men working in Malaysia. While men from this region have a long history of migrating to other parts of South Asia and the Indian Ocean region since at least the eighteenth century (Nichols 2008), the new scale of migration marks a radical shift.

Even as migration has become one of the many ways in which rural households survive and thrive, not every man in the household migrates. As households send some sons to work abroad, they ask others to stay in the village to take care of the joint household, kinship obligations, and land. The migrant joint household usually includes the migrant's parents (if alive), the migrant's wife and children, the migrant's brothers and their wives and children, and any single sisters. The migrant sends remittances for the joint household to his parents or the brother who stays in the village. Ideally, the parents or brothers spend the remittances equally on the whole joint household. Migrants also have shares in ancestral land, aspire to buy land in the village, and hope to retire and return to their wives and children in the village.

The new transnational reciprocity arrangement between the breadwinning migrant brother and the caretaking brother in the village has allowed households to consume, save, and invest their resources jointly. Sometimes as many as five brothers migrated abroad, leaving one brother in the village to take care of all their wives and children, kinship obligations, and jointly inherited or bought land in the village. This reciprocity between brothers proved key to the joint household's upward mobility. Nonetheless, most households also expected an eventual separation of the joint household. In most separations, the brother in the village felt that he had received an unfair share and that his work of taking care of affairs in the absence of the migrant was not fully recognized and compensated. While brothers who stayed in the village and other observers agreed with the principle that he should get half the share of the migrant's earnings, they also knew that very few brothers actually succeeded at earning this share—no matter how hard they fought, and no matter how much their arguments resonated with the moral values of the village audience.

Like Firoze, other caretaking brothers argued that what they did constituted a form of labor just as important as the migrant's. The household, kinship obligations, and ancestral land all contribute to upholding a Pukhtun household's honor. While the work of taking care of land was generally compared to wage-earning labor, men in other villages did not often lump it together with the work of taking care of the household (that is, women) and kinship obligations. It was even more peculiar that men who stayed in the village were comparing and making these honor-making activities commensurable with money-earning labor because the values of honor are seen as incompatible with the values associated with money. When Firoze called the activities that uphold the household's honor *mehnat* (toil) and *duty* (salaried job), he was collapsing the boundary between the

work of upholding honor and money-earning labor. As in central India (Parry 2020), people in villages in Mardan District value salaried, permanent, often government employment (*naukri*) more than informal, short-term, daily waged work (*kaam*), which they refer to as *mazdoori*. Firoze's interchangeable use of all these forms of work suggests that he aimed to contrast all money-earning labor, even *mazdoori*, with the unpaid work of upholding the household's honor. Whereas many men strive to uphold their household's honor, it is only when a household splits the responsibilities of breadwinning and taking care of honor between two brothers that the brother who stays in the village articulates the effort of taking care of the household's honor as a form of labor.

Firoze launched this peculiar claim by making a moral appeal that invoked an honorable past of positive fraternal reciprocity and egalitarianism based on the honor code of Pukhtunwali. According to him, brothers in this past recognized each other's varying contributions to the joint household and divided their assets equally on separation, even if all they had was an onion plant. Like Firoze, anthropologists have long presented the realm of reciprocal exchange between kin in contrast to market exchange in capitalism (Malinowski 2001; Mauss 2024). Anthropologists have understood these reciprocal forms of ongoing distribution and exchange between close kin as the logic that reproduces social cohesion in kin-based societies. Positive reciprocity constitutes the continual process of *giving-and-receiving* gifts through which close kin maintain social bonds (Sahlins 1965). Negative reciprocity, *taking-without-giving*, is the aberration of the norms of positive reciprocity reserved for people at the fringes of a kin-based society. Whereas these earlier anthropologists were more concerned with showing how positive reciprocity described a redistributive mechanism in kinship-based, non-state societies, Annette Weiner (1992) broke with the orthodoxy to argue that kin-based redistributive practices were inseparable from practices of expropriation at the margins. *Keeping* "inalienable possessions" like land out of reciprocal exchange was not an aberration of, but integral to the process of giving-and-receiving among kin. That is, positive and negative reciprocal relations—together—reproduce relations of social cohesion that sustain inequalities over time (Narotzky and Moreno 2002). Similarly, Firoze's invocation of fraternal reciprocity as the basis to his claim for recognition of care labor and equality in property divisions is only possible because of upper-caste men's relations of negative reciprocity with lower castes and women.

BEHIND FRATERNAL RECIPROCITY: Shifts in Caste Relations of Labor

Firoze's suggestion that the acts of care that uphold the household's honor would have been recognized as labor in the past was peculiar because historically, Pukhtuns have associated the predicament of selling labor to others as a sign of shame. To fully understand Firoze's claim, we need to turn to how labor was practiced and valued in the recent past. In a conversation about village history, a Pukhtun elder in his sixties recalled how people in the village used to mock him when he did some work as a carpenter as a young man: "Your father was so rich, why are you doing this?" And I would say, 'This is my labor [*mazdoori*].' Our people feel shame from doing labor. They always try to compare the person's current status to their forefathers' status." For him, Pukhtuns associated laboring for others with shame because it was the fate of their lower-caste dependents.

Contrary to a popular conception about the role of caste in Pakistan, I argue that it is central to practices and meanings of land and labor in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This resembles the centrality of caste as a dynamic for waste workers in urban Punjab (Butt 2019), as well as in labor relations and conditions in Pakistan (Gazdar 2007). As scholars (Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018) of urban-agrarian migrant families in India also show, caste likewise is central to the process of social reproduction.

Whereas to those outside of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, everyone who speaks Pukhto is part of an ethnic group called the Pukhtuns, in rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, only households that can be placed within a tribal, landowning lineage consider themselves Pukhtun. These upper-caste lineages consider historically landless lower castes outside of their tribal lineages and therefore not Pukhtun. Upper castes, whether they were big khans (landlords with land grants from the colonial government) or peasants (owner-cultivators), exploited the labor of tenant castes and other landless lower castes throughout the twentieth century. More strikingly, the capacity for honor and the ability to abide by the honor code of Pukhtunwali is directly tied to being an upper-caste Pukhtun. If someone wants to remark on how honorable a man is, it suffices to say, "He is Pukhtun." The honor code of Pukhtunwali, I argue, forms an upper-caste set of practices and ideology.

Each Pukhtun clan in the village had a clan-based organization (*palo*) through which households organized their reciprocal obligations. As recently as early 2000s, each clan had its own designated set of lower-caste households that exclusively provided labor to that clan in return for annual in-kind payments. In one of the villages, the main lower castes were tenants, cobblers, weavers, potters, carpenters, laundry workers, and barbers. By 2018–2019, most lower

castes had detached themselves from their Pukhtun upper-caste patrons. While some continued to do their traditional professions by running them as small businesses, they did not do so for in-kind payments from a Pukhtun clan organization. Whereas Pukhtun clans had their own *hujra* (men's collective gathering space), lower-caste households did not. A landless Pukhtun man, whose household had sold their ancestral land in the previous generation, shared his nostalgia for the *hujra* as an upper-caste, male space:

Pukhtunwali is finishing. In the past, twenty to fifty men would be in the *hujra*, and the barber [lower caste] would give them haircuts. They [lower castes] would come to us. They came because they were weak and couldn't defend themselves. They didn't know how to use guns. They were scared, so they came to us for protection. They couldn't do feuds before. We gave them refuge. In the past, the *hujra* brought power to the clan. It protected those who were poor and weak. Lower castes would be sitting around in *hujras* and did *khizmat* (servile labor) for Pukhtuns. But now, *hujras* have lost power, and instead money brings power. Now, lower castes who have money don't need the *hujra* for protection. Money is their protection now. They don't need to be protected by Pukhtuns. They don't do *khizmat* anymore. They are rich now. They have cars.

"Doing *khizmat*" translates as "to serve." It is a particular form of labor that one does for someone more powerful than them. Showing deference forms part of performing *khizmat*, which is also an attribute of unfree labor. Another Pukhtun man tried to help me understand how many Pukhtuns associated labor with shame by talking about Pukhtuns in a neighboring village: "They look down on *khizmat*. They think tenants are weak. They look down on tenancy work. When they make the tenant do small tasks like fetching fresh greens, and other small chores, they feel big."

"If someone insults them, they can't say anything back." That is, lower castes lack the power to riposte insults and defend themselves in feuds, which means they are unable to establish equality in relations of exchange. Because Pukhtuns think of lower castes as inherently weak, they think the latter need their protection. Upper castes reciprocate the *khizmat* they receive from lower castes with in-kind payments and protection, by "taking care" of them. Upper castes see their ability to establish equality in reciprocal relations—whether it is in gift-exchange among kin or killing a member of a household that has killed one of your own in

a feud—as fundamental to their ability to establish equality as autonomous and honorable men. For upper castes, lower castes' economic and social dependence on them makes them inherently unfit to practice and claim honor.

According to a Pukhtun man (who was a school principal), the Uthmankhel tribe (dominant in one of the villages) came from Afghanistan and settled this area in the fifteenth century by helping the Yusufzai (a big tribe) defeat the Dalazak (a medium-sized tribe). As a reward, the Uthmankhel were given a tract of land at the foothills of the mountains that was suitable for cattle grazing. Every male member of the tribe got an equal share of the land. Another elder Pukhtun man claimed that whereas some Pukhtuns in other nearby villages had to labor for khans (Pukhtun landlords), Pukhtuns in this village were autonomous cattle grazers who only labored for themselves. Anthropologists who studied the neighboring district of Swat in the 1950s and 1980s also report similar origin stories. In Swat, land served as a marker of distinction between Pukhtuns and lower castes, which symbolized honorable descent straight from the time of tribal conquest (Barth 1959; Lindholm 1982). Land ownership gave upper castes autonomy from the need to labor for others. Upper castes saw lower castes as descendants of those defeated and displaced by their ancestors (Lindholm 1982). With no land, lower castes were compelled to work for upper-caste Pukhtuns to survive. Upper castes saw lower castes' dependence on them for their livelihood and protection as a direct result of their ancestors' original weakness at the time of conquest (Lindholm 1982). Laboring for others constituted a sign of shame because it symbolized the “original” centuries-old lower-caste weakness. Firoze's upper-caste, male version of history was corroborated by other upper-caste men like the school principal and has also been formalized as “history-as-registered” by anthropologists and colonial officials who glorified the timelessness of this archaic tribal Pukhtun ethic. Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) differentiates between “history-as-registered,” large-scale social or historical processes, and “history-as-lived,” how people understand these processes. Upper-caste men perceived an overlap between formal and lived history.

Even today, men from lower castes are not recognized as honorable Pukhtuns, no matter how much land and respect they have acquired over time. Similarly, Pukhtun men who had sold their ancestral land over time found themselves feminized because, like lower castes, they had lost autonomy and depended on laboring for others to survive. The possession of ancestral land proves central to Pukhtun honor because it provides the basis for autonomy from labor. As a migrant visiting his village put it, “No one sells land to make money. Land is

like a wife. Land is equal to honor. When someone sells land, people mock them because they know that they don't have money. They say, you are without honor [*beghairat*]. Selling ancestral land is like selling one's parents' bones."

His use of biological metaphors of ancestors' bones and women's bodies to describe ancestral land indicates its centrality in reproducing patrilineal continuity. Land is inseparable from the biological means to reproduce the patriline—ancestors' bones symbolize remnants of past efforts to continue the patriline, and women's bodies are vessels that ensure its continuity in the future. When a man sells his ancestral land, he is not only doing away with the past efforts of his ancestors but also robbing his sons of the ability to continue an honorable line of descent. In historically patrilineal societies, masculinity takes on a particular content and form, which [Diane King and Linda Stone \(2010\)](#) call "lineal masculinity." Given the importance of patrilineal continuity in some of these societies, masculinity has a particular relationship with time. Masculinity is asserted by establishing a relationship to the past primarily through remembering and revering male ancestors who established the community, usually through a heroic acquisition and then sustaining the possession of a large tract of land over a long period. Similarly, futurity is experienced as a pressure on the current generation of men to continue the lineage. For upper-caste Pukhtuns, honor as lineal masculinity was established through historic membership in a landowning caste, whose line of descent began with the conquest of this land a few centuries ago.

Upper-caste Pukhtuns differentiate between those who labor as feminized dependents and those who are free from laboring for others as honorable—masculine, autonomous, and egalitarian. This distinction rests on a concept of labor and property different from a labor theory of value. In European Enlightenment ideas of the individual and private property, as exemplified in John Locke's labor theory of value, the individual's labor mixes with a piece of land, making it productive and giving *him* the right to enclose it ([Macpherson 2011](#)). In Europe's colonial conquest of the Americas, the idea of value in land came from colonizers making "empty," "unproductive" land (*terra nullius*) "productive," thus justifying its enclosure as private property. [Tania Li's \(2014\)](#) ethnography shows that indigenous people in the highlands of Sulawesi, Indonesia, also have individualist conceptions of labor and creation of property: individuals who clear out a piece of common land create individual property. When faced with the transition from swidden agriculture to commodity production for the global market, cultivators who began accumulating land by investing in their individual and hired labor, were not confronted with a dilemma. Already existing individualist theories

of labor and property among the Sulawesi in fact facilitated the transition. Upper-caste Pukhtuns, on the other hand, must navigate between the idea that labor is the destiny of shameful, dependent, and landless lower castes, and the reality that honorable, autonomous, and landowning Pukhtuns are now compelled to sell their labor abroad.

In contrast to individualist labor theories of value, in upper-caste Pukhtun discourse, the tribe's historic masculinity enabled men to militarily and politically defeat a weaker, effeminate people and conquer their land a few centuries ago. In the origin stories of Pukhtun conquest, upper-caste men did not claim that their ancestors had converted unproductive land into a productive resource through men's labor, giving them their right to ownership. For them, lineal masculinity, not labor, constituted the source of property in land. Property in land was a fetishistic representation of their masculinity and autonomy from labor. Lower castes who labored for others could never create property. Laboring, rather than being the *source* of property, was a mere *effect* of its lack. In the caste-based agrarian economy in the colonial and postcolonial era in Mardan, when these ideas of labor and property dominated, lower-caste labor was not being bought and sold in the village through a free market. Lower castes could exclusively give their labor to the Pukhtun clans they were attached to. Pukhtun clans gave them in-kind payments and protection in return. Labor was mediated by personalized social relations of domination based on caste. Thus, productive activity derived meaning and significance from particular relations—caste, kinship, and gender—which also naturalized the basis of that activity. Similarly, upper-caste discourse naturalized lower-caste labor as feminized servitude, as it resulted from the original weakness of lower castes' ancestors who had lost their land and left their descendants to depend on brave and masculine Pukhtuns.

When Firoze invoked an egalitarian past to claim recognition for his care labor, he was exclusively referring to an egalitarian ethic of reciprocity between upper-caste men who equally shared the benefits of an economic, political, and social regime based on caste and gender exploitation. In this regime, upper-caste men's relations of egalitarian interdependence were made possible by their ownership of property and from their autonomy from labor. Positive reciprocity between upper-caste men resulted from their negative reciprocity with lower castes. Firoze's claim that his care labor would have been recognized as labor in the past was an anachronistic one. Nonetheless, his claim resonated with a broad audience because he was invoking an upper-caste version of history. It resonated with upper castes concerned about lagging behind their upwardly mobile kin

and being unable to reproduce their lineal masculinity by merely inheriting the means of class and caste reproduction in a changing economy.

LABOR: From Feminized Servitude to Sacrificial Masculinity

If in upper-caste discourse selling one's labor is associated with shame, why did Firoze equate it with his care labor of upholding honor, a particularly upper-caste masculine pursuit? Since the 1970s, as the previous caste-based agrarian economy has shifted toward a migration-oriented one, caste-based practices and meanings of labor and relations of dependence have begun to change. Upper-caste men who looked down on laboring for others began migrating to the Gulf countries. While many proud upper castes refused to migrate because of their views on laboring, other Pukhtuns were open to migrate because working for non-Pukhtuns in foreign countries did not carry the same amount of shame.

A Pukhtun migrant to Malaysia who was visiting the village reflected on the shift that allowed migration to become the dominant aspirational ideal in the village. For him, the shift happened when most Pukhtuns realized that to buy land, or to keep their land, men had to earn money abroad. Most people buying land in the village were migrants, while those selling it were generally not. He added that the only way he managed to endure the hardships of migration and toil was by constantly thinking about getting his sons educated so they did not have to become migrants like him. Men as old as fifty toiled as construction workers in the Gulf because they believed it a necessary sacrifice to help educate their sons and secure a better future for the household.

When talking about their work abroad, migrants rarely spoke about the actual labor they performed to earn money. Rather, they focused on how the whole migration process, which included their work, was full of hardships, degradation, racism, anxieties, loneliness, state repression, status precarity, and physical violence. Shahid, visiting from Malaysia for a few weeks, said, "The life of an elder brother is spent trying to improve the lives of his younger brothers and sisters." When he was a teenager, his migrant uncles did not give his father his claimed share in the household's joint assets. Shahid's parents made him quit tenth grade and sent him to Malaysia. According to his mother, Shahid had "done care" for his household "from the beginning." With his hard work in Malaysia, he had helped build a new big house, married off two of his sisters, was paying for his third sister's education, and had even bought a piece of land.

A sacrifice is an act of giving up something or someone valuable with the aim of restoring some kind of order (Mayblin 2014). When a migrant "gives sacrifice," he gives up on his own aspirations, health, and happiness by leaving the comforts

of home and his status in the village to labor in a strange, hostile land with the hope that he will restore his household's otherwise downwardly mobile status in the village. The hardships of working abroad differ from those of working in the village because of the loss of citizenship, the loss of economic and cultural status, and the vulnerability faced abroad. Many migrants experience these losses as emasculation. Furthermore, laboring abroad makes for a particularly masculine sacrifice because men who work in the village at least have the comfort of returning to their homes at the end of the day. When they return, their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters do *khizmat* for them: serve them food, do their laundry, clean their homes. Migrants, however, have to give up on these comforts.

When migrants give the gift of sacrificial labor, they establish a new vertical kinship between themselves and those who benefit from and depend on the sacrifice. The migrant gains new status and power over his parents and brothers. In return for his sacrifice, Shahid's father consulted him on big household decisions like whose education warranted investment or whether the front yard needed renovation. His mother and sisters showered him with respect and affection. The week Shahid returned to the village, all his aunties came one by one, bearing gifts of fruits, nuts, chickens, and biscuits to "give congratulations." He sat in the middle of a jute cot, surrounded by his aunties, as they asked him how he was doing, how things were in Malaysia, and whether he suffered back pain. A visit dedicated to giving congratulations signifies an act of recognition for masculine sacrifice.

Migrants referring to migrant labor as a sacrifice, and their kin recognizing it as such, signal a shift in the meaning of labor. Labor, no longer a sign of weakness, was now seen as a necessary sacrifice to uplift the household's honor. In contrast to their own sacrifice for their households, migrants often saw their kin, especially their brothers, as living comfortably in the village without fully understanding the hardships migrants endured to earn money. They described their kin as "having fun" and "living in comfort," spending remittances. Shahid's household chastised his younger brother, who had been deported from Malaysia, for being a son "without care" and a "loafer." He spent money (earned by Shahid in Malaysia) as he "roamed around" with the wrong crowd and was belligerent, disobedient, and hot-headed at home. The younger brother sometimes pretended this did not bother him. Another time, he articulated the preferential treatment given to migrant brothers, "If one brother is rich and one poor, the rich one gets more respect. Giving respect means that people stand up for you when you enter the room. They try to find you the best spot in the room. If you're poor, people don't get up; they just point to where you should sit."

In another previously joint household that had separated because one brother had succeeded through his work in Malaysia, the wealthier brother thought that one cannot take the responsibility of helping someone if they were not willing to help themselves: “One home cannot live on top of another.” These individualist ideas of labor and money were precisely the kind that Firoze admonished in his critique of capitalism. While I did not get to meet Firoze’s brother Ghaffar, we can infer that he probably had a similar narrative about why he should not have to share the fruits of his labor with Firoze.

Unlike Shahid’s younger brother, Firoze could not be easily boxed into the category of comfortable dependence and freeloading. He worked in the municipal government and had tried to earn a master’s degree in a nearby city but had to give up on that dream because the household needed him in the village. During the dispute, Firoze’s father told him that he should have migrated like Ghaffar instead of staying in the village and expecting a share of Ghaffar’s assets. Firoze told his father that he stayed to take care of him and his aging mother. Firoze rebutted Ghaffar’s argument with his own narrative of sacrifice—of how he had given up on his education, a possible job, and even migration by staying for the sake of caring for the household. By pointing out the migrant’s dependence on his sacrifice of upholding the household’s honor, Firoze reclaimed some dignity as an upper-caste man economically dependent on a wage-earning brother. Firoze both critiqued the new dominance of money-earning labor and re-signified his care labor for the household in terms of money-earning labor and masculine sacrifice. That is, in spite of Firoze’s critique of the dominant values of labor associated with capitalism, he had also conceded to them.

In capitalism, when people are compelled to sell their labor, labor also becomes the means through which people gain social and cultural standing in a community (Postone 1993; Weeks 2011). As it becomes a vector through which people construct their identities (Harvey and Krohn-Hansen 2018), they struggle over and make sense of new regimes of labor by renovating existing, culturally specific practices and meanings of labor (Chari 2004; Li 2014; Martin 2022). In Pukhtun villages, a shift occurred from only lower castes doing servile labor for upper castes to a new economic conjuncture in which men across castes strove to sell their labor abroad. Upper-caste men confronted with an otherwise shameful predicament of laboring for others renovated the meaning of labor through ideas of honorable masculinity and sacrifice. For them, selling their labor became an honorable endeavor because it benefited their household. As the economy shifted toward migration, the meaning of labor changed partially through boundary

struggles happening within the household in the name of the household. It was also through the household that people navigated shifts in caste and class practices and meanings. The lines between processes of production and social reproduction look porous, if not completely permeable, when we look at them from the vantage point of the household. Building on the scholarship on how people struggle over the meaning of labor, I've shown that the household constitutes a central site through which people make sense of changes in labor. Here, as in the Euro-American work ethic described by [Kathi Weeks \(2023\)](#), the moral basis for selling one's labor is tied to the ideology of the family or household. "The family is the reason we are supposed to want to go to work, the reason we have to go to work, and the reason we can go to work" ([Lewis 2022](#), 13).

FURTHER BEHIND FRATERNAL RECIPROCITY: Shifts in Kinship/ Gender Hierarchies in Care Labor

Upper-caste men's fraternal reciprocity has yet another condition of possibility: kinship and gender hierarchies of care labor in the joint household. However, as joint households become transnational households, the kinship and gender hierarchies that animate the process of social reproduction also shift.

Feminist histories of Europe show that the development of capitalist relations relegated reproductive labor to a separate, domestic sphere, one devalued in comparison to money-earning productive labor ([Federici 2004](#); [Fraser 2014](#)). In the Western nuclear family, the separation of reproduction from production generally mapped neatly onto a gendered division of labor between devalued female caregivers at home and valorized male breadwinners in the workplace. In the South Asian joint household, not all caregivers and forms of care labor are devalued. Unlike the Western liberal "sexual contract" ([Pateman 1988](#)), which primarily recognizes men as citizen-workers and women as their dependents, relationships within the joint household in South Asia are more aptly captured by [Suad Joseph's \(2005\)](#) concept of the "kin contract." Unlike the Western nuclear family, which centers the conjugal couple in the family, the multigenerational Arab household in "kin-based patriarchies" is animated by kinship, that is, by gender *and* generational hierarchies. Older women and men protect and care for junior women and men while simultaneously exercising control over them. Junior men and women, who depend on men and older women, solicit care and protection, knowing that it entails giving up some control over their autonomy. "The kin contract is justified through love/power relations" that Joseph calls "care/control." In these relations, "familial care is coupled with the submission to familial controls" ([Joseph 2005](#), 8). Similarly, [Sarah Lamb \(2000\)](#)

shows how in the North Indian joint household, seniors give “hierarchical gifts” (like blessings, affections, curses) to their juniors, who in return do *seva* (show compliance and deference). Extending these insights to analyses of social reproductive labor, we can begin to carve out kin-based hierarchies of care labor in the joint household. In the Western nuclear family, gender animates the division between social reproductive labor and productive labor. In the South Asian joint household, kinship is also central. Broadly, there are two hierarchically ordered forms of care labor that are distributed along the lines of gender and generation. Men and older women’s care labor for junior women and men is inflected with exercising control over them. I call this the labor of *downward care*. Junior women and men’s care labor for older men and women is inflected with submission. I call this the labor of *upward care*.

In rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, older men and women referred to taking care of junior women and men as an emotional burden. In a migrant joint household of five brothers, four were in Malaysia and the eldest had stayed in the village as the head of the household of all five wives and a dozen or so children. The wife of the youngest migrant described the eldest brother’s life as full of *tension* (stress): “He has to take everyone to the doctor, to school, and to fulfil reciprocal obligations [*ghamkhaadi*]. It’s like he has five wives and fifteen children.” In a joint household, older men and women did this emotionally burdensome work because they wanted to prevent women from “gaining too much freedom.” They feared that with their husbands abroad, women would take more control over the household’s budget, decision-making, their own labor and mobility. Some women did succeed at this. Women’s gossip updates were usually full of stories and suspicions that “free” (*azad*) migrant wives were having extramarital affairs with men. Some women did indeed elope with men. To make sure that women’s transgressions were kept in check, in-laws closely surveilled women’s phone calls and accompanied them on public errands. Men protecting women, accompanying them to hospitals, markets, and schools, and running errands in the absence of the migrant, are all understood as forms of care for the household. Firoze called this the labor of “taking care” (*khayaal saathal*).

Men’s claim that their acts of downward care constituted a form of labor was widely recognized in the village. No comparable debate or struggle existed about recognizing women’s upward care as labor. Junior women’s upward care for older women and men was referred to as *khizmat*, which is similar to what [Lamb \(2000\)](#) describes as *seva* in North India. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the servile labor performed by lower castes is also referred to as *khizmat*. Women’s *khizmat* included anything from a daughter-in-law cooking and cleaning for her parents-in-law to a wife bringing her husband’s slippers when he came home,

serving his food, and preparing his bath. Junior women spoke about *khizmat* as a form of work (*kaar*) and a sacrifice. Senior women often complained about the emotional burden of “taking care” of junior women and kinship obligations. Based on their years of *khizmat* and sacrifice for the joint household, senior women thought they were owed control over their son’s incomes. However, neither group of women crossed the boundary to compare their labor and acts of care with men’s money-earning labor, let alone claim that it was convertible into a share in property. Firoze’s boundary struggle also only sought recognition for men’s labor of downward care, not for the upward care labor done by women. In fact, his labor of downward care derived its social value from the premise that women were incapable of providing certain forms of care (like controlling their sexuality and being heads of the household). While Firoze blurred the boundary between care labor and labor, he still upheld the caste, kinship, and gender hierarchies that gave upper-caste men’s care labor and labor any value to begin with. Caste, kinship, and gender are inextricably linked in shaping the practices and meanings of labor and care labor. This is just as true for purportedly egalitarian tribes like the Pukhtuns in Pakistan as it is for other caste-based communities of South Asia (Chowdhry 2010; Gupta 2016).

When households confront the emergence of transnational labor and kinship arrangements, some forms of care are more readily recognized as labor than others. Furthermore, these upper-caste relations of negative reciprocity (with women and lower castes) generate new practices and meanings of labor and care labor in a changing economy. That is, kinship constitutes a central dynamic in generating capitalism (Bear et al. 2015; Yanagisako 2002). Furthermore, kinship just as much concerns mutuality as it does non-mutuality (Goldfarb and Bamford 2025).

CONCLUSION

In the scholarship and politics on social reproduction, the starting point is often to seek recognition of care as labor. For feminist political economists, recognizing care as labor “makes visible” what otherwise remains “analytically hidden” by economists and denied by policy makers (Bhattacharya 2017, 2). Similarly, feminist policy advocates have introduced ways to measure women’s unpaid care work hours to render visible their unpaid contributions to gross domestic production (Elson 2017). Recognition, commentators argue, can lead to a reduction in the burden of care and/or a redistribution of the value it produces. Grass-roots political movements, like the Wages for Housework campaign, are also

premised on the recognition of care as labor to politicize working-class women. Together, these efforts to recognize care as a form of labor are part of a larger feminist and anti-capitalist politics. At a first glance, Firoze's struggle to get his care recognized might be seen as an everyday example of this politics. While Firoze's struggle certainly challenges the valorization of waged labor and the new forms of masculinity it engenders, it also re-inscribes gender and generational hierarchies within the household. Getting his care recognized allows him to make a moral claim to a greater share in the fruits of emergent forms of labor. Recognition of care as labor, in this case, opens the door for a potential redistribution of resources among men, if that. By showing how struggles to recognize care as labor vis-à-vis waged labor do not necessarily lead to feminist redistributive or political outcomes, this article shows the limits of the politics of recognition of care as labor. As the scholarship on social reproduction expands the scope of recognizing invisible forms of care and uncommodified activities, we need to pay more attention to the complex hierarchies that constitute the distribution of the work of care and how people think about and value care as labor.

ABSTRACT

How do men claim recognition and compensation for their care labor? When a rural economy shifts from agriculture toward international migration, joint households send some sons abroad to work and ask others to stay in the village to take care of the household's land, women, and kinship obligations. The men who stay argue that this work of "taking care" should be recognized and compensated with half of a migrant brother's earnings. Drawing on ethnographic research with transnational households in migrant-sending villages in northwestern Pakistan, I examine how men who stay in the village invoke caste, gender, and kinship to claim recognition and compensation for their care labor. While these claims may resemble feminist critiques of the undervaluation of care labor vis-à-vis waged labor in capitalism, the article shows the limits of the politics of recognition of care as labor. [labor; care; kinship; caste; gender; social reproduction; migration]

NOTES

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