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ANALYZING THE CAREER DEVELOPMENT BARRIERS FACED BY RURAL WOMEN IN INDIA

Abstract

In India, one of the most populous countries in the world, women make up approximately half of the country's population. While most of Indian women hold the highest educational degrees and enter the workforce almost in every sector, rural women are lagging behind in their career development. The study was aimed at investigating the factors that inhibit and challenge rural women to progress in their career development. The study was conducted in two folds of data collection. The first fold is qualitative data using interviews with 10 rural women and their analysis using thematic analysis, and the second fold is quantitative research and data collection from 148 rural women using a semi-structured survey questionnaire based on the identified themes and analyzed using SPSS. The findings of the study illustrated various barriers related to personal, social, family, economic, and infrastructure issues. Respondents spoke about several challenges they face with not having support to continue their higher studies. Eighty-five percent of rural women demonstrated they are suppressed in society due to gender stereotypes and are predominantly overburdened with family responsibilities. Furthermore, the study recommends significant implications for Indian women and the government from a global perspective.

Keywords

women education, women workforce, rural society,
work-life balance, women empowerment

JEL Classification

I23, I25, O15, J21

INTRODUCTION

Despite the emphasis on Indian women's health and education, since high economic development in the early 1990s, women in India comprised less than 25 percent of workforce in 2011–2012. According to the Indian National Sample Survey (NSS) on employment in 2014, a sharp reduction was observed, with 33 percent in 2005, and even more percent among Indian rural women, which is worse than any other surrounding countries like Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. In 2011, the Indian women labor force participation rate (LFPR) recorded the women's participation in the workforce among urban and rural areas who are above 18 years of age. The per-thousand-person survey found a sharper decline in participation among rural women, from 330 to 253, than among urban women, from 165 to 155 (NSS, 2014). One of the major problems in the increased unemployment rate in India was a low education level. Though the rate of education is gradually increasing among rural women, it is not significantly providing them with employment opportunities because of the dropout in workforce participation rate with the increase in the secondary education level. This workforce participation rate declines only among those women who are educated below secondary school and the college graduates seeking to get better jobs with reasonable salaries. Klasen and Pieters (2015) stressed that the own education of urban women was found to have more participation rate in labor force than the one educated in a rural area. Srivastava and Srivastava (2010) asserted that most of the

rural women are self-employed or temporarily employed in the agriculture sector for food production. However, they are paid less for harvesting the crops. On the other hand, skilled women in domestic works are engaged in pottery, weaving and other petty trades, which brings them a small income. There are many barriers to continuing their further higher education. Though education may not result in women's high work participation, it will certainly require women to secure well salaried and non-agricultural jobs. Therefore, there is an immense need to explore the factors hindering the career of these rural women. Most Indian women are attitudinally rooted in the culture of Indian society. There are traditions and customs to give dowry at marriage. Women were considered to be financially liable to their families since their birth. For these reasons, still most of the villages practice female feticide. Even in some families if a girl child is born, they receive a lower education, less food, and deprived health care than their brothers. Though the cultural practices differ in many countries, the perceptions and outcomes related to women are the same. Despite a female having the right to education, health care, and employment, they are overloaded with household chores with no further support from the family members for her career development (Barati et al., 2016).

Despite numerous studies on women empowerment, women's education, and women's career development, today women in rural India are still oppressed and deprived of their career growth. The global women development has emphasized various issues with education and career as a priority in developed countries, like the United Kingdom, USA and other Western countries, and lacks global attention on Indian villages. It is understood there are no sufficient exclusive studies that explored the barriers to rural women's career growth. This research gap avoids connecting rural India in the global women's development not only in socio-economic and political fields, but also in their participation in many other major developments.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Kumar (2014) mentioned that despite the gender bias, women in India today experience many challenges that include family responsibilities, lack of work-life balance, lack of the progression of higher education, required qualification, and also the problems with entering into professional life, managing their attitudes at the workplace, no effective ability to mentor and other problems related to giving birth to children. Karl (2009) also affirmed that married working women face lots of challenges than unmarried working women. Further, Burke et al. (2010) studied the association between organization practices that support women's career and their attitudes, satisfaction and emotional prosperity. Research studies on women career development reported that the difficulties of women in India are different from Western countries. The absence of required technology like motor system for pull water, electricity supply, modern kitchen appliances, lack of washing and cleaning technologies for accomplishing domestic responsibilities consume a lot of their time. On the other hand, the responsibility of raising children is kept on women in every Indian family. Unlike urban

India, rural places lack the facility to hire domestic helpers and therefore there is a need to depend hugely on elder women in their families, which is also not possible because of aged people and their health conditions (Buddhapriya, 2009). Although the changing legal, socio-economic transformations provide them with employment prospects. Because of these reasons, educated and working women also face more stress than working men. So the rural women's advancement in education and workplace participation and modern thinking is comparatively lower than urban women. It is evident that the growth of employment opportunities in urban areas almost doubled during 2005, while in rural areas the growth was only 9-12 percent (Barati et al., 2016). Bhumali (2004) found the poverty rate and lack of job opportunities in rural India are the grassroots for less literacy rate of women in rural areas compared to urban areas. Kadam (2012) highlighted the importance of female education and its contribution to the society development. The author illustrated that female education has a negative association with population growth, child and infant mortality rate, and a positive relationship with rate of life expectancy, workforce participation rate, eco-

conomic development and female age of marriage. Pankajam and Lilitha (2005) explored the women situation in rural India and stated that women work longer working hours than men and substantially contribute to their family income, yet they are perceived as unproductive workers. Today most of Indian rural women are deprived from both information and economic status. Ahmed (2016) evaluated a research gap between the provisions in Indian constitution and the prevailing conditions of Indian rural women and found that women have insufficient access to information and economic opportunities because of both inter and intra state imbalances. According to Michael (2006), the work stress among women will have an adverse effect on their personal life and work performance. Consequently, many women develop defensive behavior and develop new habits of drug and alcohol consumption to get stress relief. Sivan and Sathyamoorthy (2014) suggested some strategies to cope with the work stress for women and maintain the work-life balance as an encouragement to join in managerial positions. Singh (2003) argued that it has long been considered a traditional practice to work in the agricultural sector. Among them, females were found to be more in number than men, and this commitment to food production has restricted women to take up higher challenges nor moving to various paid work locations. Most of rural women are found to participate in the agricultural sector for food production and are also engaged in petty trades like weaving, handicrafts, food selling, collecting wood for cooking, taking care of children, accomplishing domestic duties as informal jobs (Barati et al., 2016; Buddhapriya, 2009).

Among the previous studies, Barati et al. (2016) and Buddhapriya (2009) presented the problems and challenges faced by Indian women in career development. However, there were few differences in the factors hindering urban and rural women. Few jobs are most challenging for women and require long working hours to complete the task resulting in a lot of work pressure and stress. It can also be caused due to the lack of knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform the job, which is referred to as occupational stress. The traditional viewpoint on women in society in handling tasks is seen as unskillful, incapable and inefficient when compared to men. Such presumptions dis-

courage women to accept any manual jobs and include gender discrimination, remuneration differences, deprivation of promotions, career growth opportunities (Barati et al., 2016; Cooke, 2010; Buddhapriya, 2009). In many countries, there exists gender segregation at work. Normally, women are preferred for soft jobs and men for hard and high productivity jobs like manufacturing division (Yang & Li, 2015). Guoying (2011) added that women are less likely seen in advanced paid jobs such as information technology, management, specialized jobs. The survey reports of Gupta et al. (1998) stated that only two women among 100 men secure administrative and top positions in an Indian organization. Sexual harassment is a global issue hindering women worldwide not only at the workplace, but also in any other establishments like universities and hospitals. This happens when men take supervisory roles and women are in the subordinate job roles. In some situations, women are threatened to leave their jobs. Since India practices a mixed culture of working male and female together, employees have to work even after 6 pm in the evening without exclusive women safety and security at work. But traditional beliefs do not allow women to work beyond these hours and create panic in their families on a daily basis till they return from their work due to the usual violent and unlawful events in society and sometimes they even are compelled to quit their jobs (Barati et al., 2016). Women have to adjust themselves at the workplace due to numerous factors like culture, work environment, adjusting at the time of conflicts, decision making, and communication process. If a woman does not adapt to such circumstances, her situation becomes worse and stressful due to gossips and accuses. Women in rural areas are excluded to participate in informal network groups due to the local customs that women are restricted to house premises. Modern technology mandates individuals to get trained, and such exclusions make them unaware of the contemporary lifestyle, mentoring, and job opportunities assigned for women, and also deprive them of various training and vocational prospects leading to no growth in their career (Buddhapriya, 2009). An Indian woman plays a major role and takes responsibility as a housewife, a mother, a sister, or a daughter inside her house, and as a friend and a colleague outside her house environment. So when fulfilling all these roles, she needs to

cope with and face new challenges personally and professionally and it is not her sole responsibility to make up all these roles. The employers who set the norms in organizations and the family member's support at homes are the implementers of women's work-life balance (Mohanty & Jena, 2016; Khan & Agha, 2013).

Most of Indian rural women face family problems, lack of financial support for higher education, prevailing socio-economic issues, few face gender discriminations at work and a lack of women's autonomy in decision making. Autonomy is referred to having control over assets, freedom to mobilize for education and work, and commitment to participate in self-help groups. Wiklander (2010) explicitly presented the financial insecurity among elderly women in rural India. These women have exhausted the opportunities to creatively use their time and therefore there must be some direction for their economic empowerment to bring leadership quality, which can positively influence the rural society. According to Parihar et al. (2013), women of a nation is the mirror image of its advancement. The level of maturity and sense of responsibility of a society is measured by a good status enjoyed by a woman. Mammen and Paxson (2000) suggested the economic empowerment of rural women can contribute significantly to agricultural development, and currently such efforts in advancing women's financial growth are deficient. As for women empowerment, Slathia et al. (2015) suggested a cooperative approach of socio-economic development for women with rural tourism. Kaur (2014) emphasized the workforce participation of unskilled rural women and their role in the growth of the rural economy with some micro level assessments. Bernadiner and Mangala (2017) stressed that the economic empowerment of rural women will raise the equal participation of women in domestic and community activities. Only higher workforce participation does not give good results, rather it must be supported with higher education and owned properties. Some studies conducted by the University of Maryland stated that improved transportation facilities will increase the workforce participation of rural women. In rural India, the new technology is of no use as families lack financial resources even to feed themselves. Women are constrained just for labor and reproductive sources, ignore their per-

sonal interests and are dominated by men even to raise their voice in society. Other concerns are child marriages. Multiple studies stated the violation of child rights by marrying a girl very soon. This situation constrains a girl child to drop out her schooling and restrict herself with domestic responsibilities and early pregnancy. The statistical estimation of NSS 2014 reported twenty-three million girls face this situation and most of them are from rural India. In addition, of 4.5 million marriages in India, more than half are with girls between the ages of 15 and 19. The significant early marriages are not only subsequent in the disruption of women education and their employment but also burdening them with many responsibilities and diminishing the generations because of young women deaths during pregnancy. The extant literature on women's career development lacks the barriers from the Indian rural context and lacked to address research questions on to what extent Indian rural women are able to progress and achieve their personal and professional growth in the fields they are interested in. Therefore, this study aimed to explore various barriers that are impeding Indian rural women for their career development in terms of having their freedom to pursue higher education and securing paid jobs like men in various industries that interest them. For this, the study intends to use a qualitative research approach to collect first-hand information through personal interviews from Indian rural women. Also, to segregate various identified barring factors, the study attempted to categorize the underlying dimensionalities of the identified elements, using a quantitative research approach. This objective of the study would bridge the research gaps and provide inferences to the Indian government and rural society to undertake further development initiatives.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study established both qualitative and quantitative techniques to address various research questions. Guba and Lincoln (1994) underlined that knowledge is theory-laden, and Morgan (1983) suggested all methods are determined by theory. Therefore, to comprehend theoretical information, qualitative research is imperative, which is characterized by a phenomenon. Kuper et al. (2008) stat-

ed that qualitative data empowers a study to generate quality data by examining the genuine opinion of the respondents. Moreover, the elucidations drawn by closely networking with respondents will contribute to a specific domain of knowledge and brings new opportunities to researchers in addressing their research questions.

2.1. Data collection and analysis

This study used two-fold data collection i.e., both qualitative and quantitative data. So this study is the first of its kind to explore the relevant barriers for rural women in India. The first fold is through personal interviews that facilitate gaining in-depth knowledge about various concerns from the rural women's point of view. As education, medical and business fields are commonly available field of jobs, well educated women are employed in these sectors. So qualitative data was collected from 10 rural non-working and working women from above mentioned fields in the villages of the north part of India. By using a purposive sampling, they were asked to share their thoughts, opinions, discussions, and other concerns about local women's education and overall career development. The study has no direct interference in this process but conducted interviews and ensured to continue interviews till the responses would be sufficient to reach the saturation of opinions. The interviews were conducted in the local language so that the respondents would be able to express their experiences better. The interviews approximately lasted 50-60 minutes. To ensure the openness, interviews were not recorded, however, the study noted the important points. The participants were found to be excited to share their feelings, opinions, and experiences during the interview. Both closed and open-ended questions based on the literature review were asked to ensure the consistency of their opinions. More information was gained through open-ended questions. Such questions included "Share what challenges you faced while pursuing your education", "How did your family support you for completing your education?", "Were your family members supportive financially to bring you up and meet all your expenses?", "Do your spouse support you to continue higher education or to work?", "How was your overall family life after marriage?", "What problems did you face as a married woman?", "What are your interests re-

lated to career development and what barriers do you face to reach your career goal?", "What challenges do women face in terms of facilities in the rural area?", "Do educated women have enough paid job opportunities?", "How does the society treat a woman in rural areas?". The same questions were asked to all the participants. Few probing questions were also asked to lead and steer the interviews to accomplish the key objective of the research. Thus an unbiased first-hand analyzed document was obtained from the rural women.

Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to analyze the collected data. TA is mostly used by many researchers in the field of innovation or specially to conduct in-depth research. While there is no stable approach in using TA, it enables a researcher to recognize, evaluate and report themes within collected data. As Braun and Clarke (2006) stated, the coding process is governed based on the themes within the theory. In this case, the themes and sub-themes were analyzed and drawn mostly about women in the context of rural areas. While the profile of personal interview respondents was presented in Table 1, the themes and sub-themes identified were presented in Table 2. The second fold of data collection was qualitative data and was conducted using a survey questionnaire based on the identified themes and sub-themes from 148 rural women and summarized in Table 3. The questionnaire was developed in the local language (Hindi) with the closed-ended questions developed on a 5-point Likert scale for the study, 5 as Strongly agree, 4 as Agree, 3 as Neutral, 2 as Disagree, and 1 as Strongly disagree, and distributed, using a random sampling method, among the women respondents who have minimum knowledge on how to read, write and understand the text. Then the final results were summarized and translated for the research analysis purpose as shown in Table 3.

2.2. Coding and interpretation of interview data

Firstly, the study noted the responses and got familiarized with the collected data, and identified key concepts. As soon as the concepts were identified, they were coded into potential themes till the complete data emerged into unique patterns. An inductive approach was used in the analysis pro-

cess to derive the themes directly from the documented data instead of making it preconceived (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Though manual coding has its own limitations in terms of less efficiency, the researcher coded manually and took the opportunity not to miss any key factors and reflect the same in the analysis. All the comments were analyzed and coded in relevance to the research objective and idea of identified theory. A retrospective literature review demonstrates that this study is the first of its kind that adopted the qualitative method of document analysis in analyzing the responses on rural women's career development. Therefore, these comments are considered to be the most genuine and authentic. This approach guarantees the quality of data along with its reliability and validity of research findings.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study examined the barriers to career development encountered by rural Indian women. Most previous studies conducted in the Indian context lack research studies with both qualitative and quantitative data, especially in the context of career development among rural women. Therefore, this study is considered to be vital for further researchers who are in the same area of study. The study first discusses the findings of qualitative data followed by quantitative data.

3.1. Qualitative findings

This section demonstrates the results obtained from the interviews. The questions mentioned in section 2.1 were asked during the interview with

the rural women. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of interview respondents. The study considered the respondents between the age group of 16 and 45. Among them, 70% are married with children, 10% are spinsters, 10% divorced, and 10% are widows. Among them, 30% hold high school and higher secondary education, and 20% have a diploma and a bachelor's degree. The years of work experience vary from 0 to 12 years.

Most of the research studies commonly stated the issues of work-life balance among working women and identified this as a major hindrance to their career development. Based on the same idea when the researcher asked respondents to share their challenges while pursuing their education and also as a workwoman, five of the respondents have expressed that they face issues related to work-life balance and find it tough to manage both personal and professional life, which ultimately stresses them both mentally and physically. Some women expressed their upsets and guilty as they do not get sufficient time to spend with their children and share love with them. Another three respondents experienced inevitable domestic responsibilities since their childhood and even discontinued their higher education during pursuing their schooling. Consequently, they did not get any opportunity to learn new skills to seek employment.

Multiple studies addressed that the major causes for women's career development are early marriages, pregnancy, and raising their children (Al-Asfour, 2017; NSS, 2014; Buddhapriya, 2009). When asked about their financial and family support in completing their education, and if their spouse will allow them to work or not, how does society treats a woman in rural areas, it is not sur-

Table 1. Demographic profile of interview respondents

S. No.	Age	Civil Status	Educational Level	Occupation	Years of Work Experience
1	23	Married	Diploma	Teacher	2
2	27	Married	Bachelors	Nurse	3
3	26	Married	Higher Secondary	Teacher	5
4	16	Spinster	High school	Student	0
5	32	Divorced	Higher Secondary	Self Employed	8
6	21	Married	High school	House wife	0
7	18	Married	High school	House wife	0
8	25	Married	Higher Secondary	House wife	0
9	36	Married	Bachelors	Self Employed	7
10	42	Widow	Diploma	Teacher	12

Table 2. Themes and sub-themes identified through the interview

S. No.	Themes	Sub-themes
1	Personal Issues (PI)	Lack of work-life balance Lack of interest and competencies Health issue since pregnancy
2	Social Issues (SI)	Gender discrimination Lack of safety and security at work Lack of women empowerment
3	Economic Issues (EI)	Financial support to educate Remuneration difference at work
4	Family Issues (FI)	Restricted to marry and bear domestic responsibilities as housewife No freedom to mobilize for career growth Traditionally restricted to work in agriculture No support as an orphan
5	Infrastructure Issues (II)	Lack of suitable jobs in rural areas Lack of guidance & training Lack of technology to support in domestic work

prisingly that the same issues were expressed by more than eighty percentage of the respondents, stating most of their families are from low income background with no ability to afford their schooling expenses. Most of the times they struggle to satisfy their daily needs. Hence, they are forced to get marry soon and reduce burden to their parents and be a helping hand to their husband's family in agriculture for food production. When they were asked if the educated women have enough paid job opportunities than men, few women highlighted the issues related to society viz., gender discrimination in society and their elder's perception on no safety and security for working women. This has restricted them with no mobility to progress in their career development. When the respondents were asked about the financial support for their career development, they expressed their high professional dreams like becoming a doctor, women entrepreneur, owning small scale industries and so on. However, lack of financial and family support limited their dreams.

Today the urban population is more facilitated with improved facilities, technology, and infrastructure. The rural areas lag behind such developments (Buddhapriya, 2009). When some of the women questioned about their village facilities and infrastructure, they expressed their daily challenges in accomplishing all household chores. Though there exist slight cultural differences among urban and rural women, the overall challenges and their consequences on women's career development are almost similar. In compari-

son with other similar studies on working or educating women, the high rate of imbalance among women in their lives is because of combining education with personal life or family and work-life or a combination of all these. The study found women as a backbone to support their families as a home maker, caring children, serving elders and in food production. The rural women still value their local traditions, cultures and respect the ideas of their family and sacrifice their own life and personal interests. Though they have potential to accomplish many things in life, they are suppressed personally, financially, physically, morally and mentally, and they never complain on any issues. It is clearly observed that they want to see their family member's happiness by serving all through their lives.

Based on the various experiences from the women during the interviews, the study segregated the common ideas and identified main themes and sub-themes as illustrated in Table 2.

3.2. Quantitative findings

This section represents the data obtained from the survey questionnaires that were obtained by using the survey questionnaires among rural women. To analyze the empirical data, SPSS (Software Package for Social Sciences, version 23.0) was used. Table 3 demonstrates the mean, standard deviation, factor loadings and reliability condition of the collected 148 responses using a survey questionnaire. To determine the underlying dimensions of sub-themes, the explorato-

Table 3. Mean, standard deviation, factor loadings and reliability of themes and sub-themes of rural women career development

Themes	Sub-themes	Mean (n = 148)	S.D	Factor Loading	Cronbach Alpha Value
Personal Issues (PI)	I am experiencing work-life balance	3.51	2.18	0.832	0.806
	I do not have interest and enough competencies to progress in my career			0.715	
	I have general weakness or facing health issues from the time of my pregnancy			0.812	
Social Issues (SI)	I see women are oppressed in society in all fields	4.68	1.56	0.834	0.841
	Rural areas lack safety and security for women in the mixed gender working environment			0.853	
	Women are seen with low grade than men in our society, without motivation and empowerment			0.860	
Economic Issues (EI)	Neither my parents nor my husband are financially sound to support my career development	4.87	1.51	0.899	0.848
	A working women in our community is paid less than a men hired for a same job			0.873	
Family Issues (FI)	My family restricts women to get marry and take household responsibilities	3.95	2.08	0.871	0.792
	I do not have freedom to move another location for my education and career growth			0.864	
	From years, it is a traditional practice for women to work in agriculture for food production than going for paid jobs.			0.898	
	I am an orphan with no support from anyone for my career development			0.880	
Infrastructure Issues (II)	In our community women find a suitable job as per their own interest and education qualification.	2.47	2.16	0.870	0.753
	There are established training centers and counseling or guidance for women in our village.			0.912	
	I see many technological advancements in our rural area that can help women with their daily household chores.			0.798	

ry factor analysis (EFA) method with principal component analysis (PCA) under varimax rotation was used and revealed the acceptable condition of all the factor loadings, which are above 0.6. The factor loadings of PI range from 0.715 to 0.832 with an alpha value 0.806; SI loadings range from 0.834 to 0.860 with an alpha value 0.841; EI loadings from 0.873 to 0.899 with an alpha value 0.748; FI loadings from 0.864 to 0.898 with an alpha value 0.782 and II loadings from

0.798 to 0.912 with an alpha value 0.841. Also, the internal consistencies (Cronbach alpha value) are all in a tolerable range of above 0.7 and verified the reliability condition (Nunnally, 1978). The factorability conditions were also confirmed by the Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin value of 0.863 and a significant Bartlett’s test of sphericity ($p < 0.001$). It was found that all the sub-themes fall under the respective main themes.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to explore the possible barriers for Indian rural women’s career development from multiple dimensions and to examine the underlying dimensionalities of those factors. The academic literature lacks various dimensions on women’s problems and challenges towards their career growth. The qualitative and quantitative research approaches in this study examined various age groups of women and provided an opportunity to have deep insight into rural women’s lives and projected many interesting facts and demonstrated opinions and experiences of women, as well as from socio-economic, family, and outside world perspectives.

The results illustrated that the government reforms are limited to urban areas and rural respondents currently lack support from the Indian government. It is recommended that to some extent local com-

munities can work closely with rural families by imposing local laws on gender neutrality, promote female education, encourage women employment, facilitate with the ease to balance their work life and gradually transform the women's lives. It is suggested introducing multiple educational and professional development programs, women development fund programs, childcare centers, facilities to telecommute to workplace, flexible working hours, part-time job arrangements, pregnancy, maternity and child rearing facilities, healthcare and awareness programs exclusively for women that would assist them in their career development. Quantitative findings found that the factor structure of sub-themes falls under the category of respective main themes. Because of the small sample size, the findings of this study are limited to the north part of India and maybe inconsistent with other parts of the country as India practices mixed culture across different provinces. Therefore, more research is needed to explore the barriers to women's career development based on demographic factors. Further researchers may also examine the relationship between various barriers or empirically investigate the impact of those barriers on career development or conduct a comparative study among the neighboring Asian countries.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization: Sania Khan.

Data curation: Sania Khan.

Formal analysis: Sania Khan.

Investigation: Sania Khan.

Methodology: Sania Khan.

Software: Sania Khan.

Supervision: Sania Khan.

Writing – original draft: Sania Khan.

Writing – review & editing: Sania Khan.

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