

NOOR

An AI Companion for the Invisible Work of Women

Submission for GSMA Women Digital Leadership Award 2026

Category: Personal Reflection from AI Work | Format: Article

"She woke up before the sun. She will sleep after everyone else. And somewhere in between, she will be called not enough."

This article is not a research paper. It is not a product pitch. It is a truth — one that I have lived, one that I have watched my colleagues live, one that millions of women across Asia-Pacific carry in silence every single day. And it is a proposal: that artificial intelligence, which has so far been built largely to optimize productivity, can be reimagined to protect something far more fragile and far more important — the dignity, energy, and emotional well-being of women.

5:58 AM in Lahore

My alarm does not go off at 6:00 AM. I am already awake.

I work at a university. My husband works in some other university. We have three school-going children. By 7:45 AM, I will have prepared four lunch boxes — three for my children, one for my husband — washed the previous night's dishes, ironed uniforms, checked three school bags for forgotten homework, braided two sets of hair, and stood at the door waving goodbye to everyone I love.

Then I will go to work. Where I will teach. Where I will navigate the quiet politics of a Chairman who rarely acknowledges women's ideas until a male colleague repeats them. Where I will smile past the small condescension that no HR policy in the world has ever managed to document, because they happen in the silences between words.

I will return home at 5 PM. Teach my children. Supervise their test preparation. Lay out their clothes for tomorrow. Make dinner. And sometime around 10 PM, my husband will say, gently, that I seem distant. That I am always busy. That he feels like he does not have a wife anymore.

I will say nothing. Because I am too tired to explain. And because I have been explaining for years.

"The most under-resourced user of artificial intelligence is not the startup founder or the software engineer. It is the woman who has not slept properly in six years and has still not missed a single school pickup."

Her name is Ayesha. She is also a lecturer.

My colleague — a university lecturer, a mother of two young children — lives with her in-laws in a joint family home in Pakistan. She chose this arrangement deliberately, thoughtfully. Her in-laws watch her children while she teaches. It is a practical solution. It is also a daily negotiation.

Her university day ends at 4:00 PM. The commute home takes one hour. By the time she arrives, her children — patient all day with their grandparents — run to her with the full weight of the hours they missed her. She is their mother. She holds them. And then she begins the second shift.

Dinner. Dishes. Guests — because in a joint household, guests arrive often, and a daughter-in-law is expected to receive them with warmth, with chai, with presence. These are not requests. They are the architecture of the life she entered when she married. And she honors them, because she loves her family. Because she is not a victim. She is, in every possible measure of the word, a professional.

But at 11 PM, when the house is finally quiet and she opens her laptop to finish grading papers, there is no one who says: I see what you did today. There is no one who names it. There is no record of the hundred invisible decisions she made before breakfast. The emotional labor she expended. The fatigue she swallowed so that everyone around her could feel comfortable.

She is not unusual. She is the norm.

The silence that technology forgot

Across Asia-Pacific, women's labor force participation is rising. Girls are outperforming boys in education. Female leaders are breaking barriers in government, medicine, technology, and business. These are real and meaningful gains.

But the data also shows something that headlines do not celebrate: working women in South and Southeast Asia still perform an average of four to five hours of unpaid domestic work per

day, compared to under one hour for men in the same households. They are more likely to report emotional exhaustion. More likely to suppress negative emotions at work to avoid the 'difficult woman' label. Less likely to seek mental health support, because in many communities, to admit struggle is to invite scrutiny.

Technology has not addressed this. The artificial intelligence products that define our era — large language models, productivity assistants, scheduling tools, wellness apps — were designed, primarily, for a different kind of user. A user with uninterrupted focus time. A user whose emotional state is treated as personal rather than systemic. A user who does not have to negotiate between a child's fever and a faculty meeting.

We have built AI that can draft emails in seconds, generate code, and analyze markets. We have not built AI that says: you have been carrying too much, and I see you.

Introducing Noor

Noor — meaning light in Urdu, Arabic, and across multiple languages of the Asia-Pacific region — is a proposed AI companion designed specifically for working women and mothers.

It does not optimize her productivity. It does not add to her task list. It does not track her calories or her steps. Noor does one thing that no current AI product has been built to do at scale: it bears witness to the invisible labor of women, and it gives that labor language.

How Noor works: proactive micro-affirmations

Noor delivers intelligent, context-aware affirmations — not generic motivational quotes, but specific acknowledgments of what a woman has actually done. The AI learns her routine over time: her wake-up time, her children's school schedule, her work hours, the days she has flagged as difficult.

🔔 NOOR — 8:00 AM

You have been awake for two hours before your first meeting today. You prepared four meals before 8 AM. You are currently shaping the next generation — in your classroom and in your home. Noor sees that. Rest when you can.

🔔 NOOR — 2:30 PM

It's 2:30 PM on a Wednesday. The hardest part of the week is behind you. Drink water. You stayed composed in a difficult moment this morning. That is not small. That is strength.

 **NOOR — 5:00 PM**

You came home to your children today after a hard day. The fact that you showed up — tired, quiet, carrying everything — is the most important thing you did. They will remember your presence, not your perfection.

These notifications are not hollow. They are not produced by a generic algorithm that does not know her name. They are produced by a system that has learned what her days actually look like — and that has been trained on the specific vocabulary of invisible labor, emotional exhaustion, and the particular weight of being a woman who is expected to be everything to everyone.

How Noor works: the judgment-free outlet

The second feature of Noor is a private conversational space — available via mobile app or WhatsApp, with voice or text input — where a woman can speak or write freely without fear of being judged, misunderstood, or burdening someone she loves.

She can say: I was interrupted in a meeting for the fourth time this week and I wanted to cry. She can say: I feel like I am failing my children. She can say: I am so tired I do not know who I am anymore.

Noor does not offer unsolicited advice. It does not minimize. It does not redirect to a productivity tip. It listens. It reflects back what it hears. And then, when the woman is ready, it gently helps her find language for what she is feeling — because naming something is the first step toward releasing it.

The conversational model is trained on trauma-informed, culturally sensitive dialogue. It understands that in Pakistani, South Asian, and Southeast Asian contexts, emotional expression — particularly for women — is often constrained by cultural expectations. It meets women where they are, in their language, in their context, without imposing a Western therapeutic framework.

Crucially, Noor is not a replacement for professional mental health support. It is a first layer, the gentle daily presence that keeps a woman from reaching a breaking point in silence.

Why AI? Why now?

There is a reason this must be an AI solution and not simply a community program or a government initiative, as valuable as those are.

AI does not get tired of listening. It does not run out of patience. It is available at 3 AM when a woman cannot sleep and does not want to wake her husband. It does not judge. It does not gossip. It does not — as even the most well-meaning friends sometimes do — respond to a woman's pain with a story about their own.

AI can be deployed at scale across the Asia-Pacific region, reaching women in rural Pakistan, in urban Philippines, in suburban Indonesia, in ways that traditional support infrastructure cannot. It can be made available in local languages. It can function on basic smartphones with low data connections. It can be free at the point of use.

And critically: AI can remember. It can hold the full context of a woman's weeks and months — the accumulation of small exhaustions, the patterns of struggle — in a way that allows it to respond with genuine specificity rather than generic comfort.

"To build AI that sees women — not as users to be optimized, but as human beings who deserve to be witnessed — is one of the most important design challenges of our generation."

A note on culture and dignity

I want to be clear about what Noor is not.

Noor is not a tool that tells women their domestic roles are oppressive. It does not ask them to abandon their families, their cultural traditions, or the genuine love they have for the people they serve. Many women — including myself — choose their lives. We love our children with a ferocity that no algorithm could quantify. We take pride in our homes, in our meals, in the fabric of the families we hold together.

What Noor challenges is not the role. It is the invisibility. It is the fact that a woman can spend eighteen hours sustaining her family and workplace, and not once in that day have anyone — human or technological — acknowledge the weight of what she is doing.

Dignity does not require the dismantling of culture. It requires that culture be honest about what it asks of its women, and that those women be met — at minimum — with acknowledgment.

Noor is that acknowledgment. Delivered in their language. At the time they need it most. Without asking anything in return.

The world I am trying to build

I am a working mother in Pakistan. I make lunch boxes before dawn. I teach students who will shape the future. I come home to children who need me after I have already given most of myself elsewhere. I love my life. I am also, some days, profoundly alone in it.

I am building Noor because I needed it. My colleague Ayesha needed it. The millions of women across this region who rise before the sun and sleep after everyone else, they need it too.

Not because they are broken. Not because they cannot cope. But because every human being deserves to move through their days knowing that someone — something — sees the full truth of what they carry.

Artificial intelligence has the power to be that witness. The question is whether we choose to build it that way.

I am choosing yes.

Submitted by: Fatima Yousaf | Lecturer, Dept. of Computer Science, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan

Submitted to: GSMA Women Digital Leadership Award 2026 | Region: Asia-Pacific